AT THE RELTON ARMS

BY

EVELYN SHARP

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
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BY EVELYN SHARP

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AT THE RELTON ARMS.

CHAPTER I.

It was towards the end of a crowded reception in the musician's studio. Most of the people who had come from a sense of social obligation, and they were chiefly the mothers of his fashionable pupils, had left when the musician began to play his own compositions; and those who remained behind, and occupied the position of the Greek chorus with regard to his remarks, were his own chosen disciples, who were of course privileged to stay much longer than ordinary acquaintances. The musician, perhaps, had no effectual means of suggesting their departure; but neither was their homage, being very womanly and obvious, unpleasing to him; and when the well-dressed

Philistines had driven away in their carriages, he abandoned the attitude of the debonair host and took up that of the prophet instead, which at once gave a serious turn to the conversation. He then propounded his own theories, or somebody else's, at great length, and the chorus assented with a gentle murmur of approbation whenever there was a pause. Occasionally one of the elect would ask for some music, and the musician would single out a pupil whom he considered qualified to interpret what he had composed; and in the applause which invariably followed, the performer would be entirely eclipsed by the greater importance of what she had performed.

"Is n't it a beautiful thing? Such depth," said Mrs. Reginald Routh, moving away from the piano where she had just been singing the musician's last song. It was an uncomfortable habit she had of always anticipating what the other people would have said if she had only given them

time to speak; and she had acquired it from living many years with an unmusical though wealthy husband, who only acknowledged his wife's musical talents by sending large checks annually to the musician. On this occasion she caught the eye of some one who had just arrived, and repeated her remark emphatically; for the new-comer was a stranger who had unscrupulously interrupted the last verse of her song, and was now absorbed in prolonging the existence of a modicum of bitter tea, one sugar-plum, and a preserved cherry.

"Is it?" she answered hastily, seeing she was expected to say something. "I suppose it is quite good, of course. Who is it by? I suppose you can't say, though, without looking; and I have n't really the least desire to know. Talking of music," she continued blandly, chasing the sugar-plum round the saucer, "I have really had a treat this afternoon at St. James's Hall. Of course you have often heard Sapolienski? Don't ask me how to pro-

nounce him; I think another of the horrors added to modern composers is the length of their names. But I 'm ashamed to say I have never heard him before; I have been abroad, you see, and I am not a bit musical either. I enjoyed it much more than I expected though, and you should have seen the ovation he received at the end, ladies crowding on to the platform and throwing their rings at him! Oh, no, I am clearly not musical. But still, as he is the greatest musician of the day. . . ."

Here Mrs. Reginald Routh found her opportunity, and used it.

"Oh, indeed? I have never heard of a player of that name, but really there are so many third-rate 'eskis' now that we cannot be expected to know them all. I dislike all kinds of sentimental effusion, and society lions, especially when they are musical ones, are singularly unpleasing to me. There can be no flattery where true genius exists, and if we were to reserve our praise for real hidden talent," she paused as the

musician came within hearing and repeated her last words in a louder tone, "*real hidden* talent, music would at last find her rightful place of honor among us. Do you not think so, Mr. Digby?"

Mrs. Reginald maintained a superb air of possession over music by making it always of the feminine gender, just as she did over the musician by calling him by his first name.

Mr. Digby Raleigh, thus intercepted in his passage across the room, turned on his heel and ran his fingers through his hair as he launched out on his favorite theme with enthusiasm. For besides being an interesting musician with a studio in the West End, he had views on metaphysics and Socialism as well, and although his warm discussions of these and other modern subjects conveyed little but confused notions to the minds of his feminine hearers, yet his enthusiasm only lent him a more potent charm in their eyes.

"Not yet, Mrs. Routh, no, no, not yet,"

he exclaimed earnestly, "we are not ready, not fit for it yet. Socialism has to come first; the people must be taught the meaning of life and humanity before they can be made ready for music. Music is the end and aim of every intelligent Socialist. The people must suffer first, as *we* have all had to suffer, we who do understand and are waiting for the light which cannot shine because of the materialists who do not even feel the need of it. Life is a problem, but we at least are happiest who see that it is so, and seek for the solution with our — with our heart's blood."

The end was not quite so eloquent as the beginning of his speech, but the musician had also caught the eye of the latest comer as she stirred the grounds of her tea mechanically and looked across the room at him, and he became suddenly conscious that there was somebody in the room who was actually inclined to laugh at him. So he stumbled slightly over his last words, and blushed a little at his own emotion; but

the other ladies were glancing at one another with much sympathy as if to show that they thoroughly understood all he meant and felt, and they evidently expected some more to follow. So he ran his fingers through his hair again, and looked at Mrs. Reginald Routh, and tried to forget the gray-eyed girl in the warmth of his cause.

"It is not Parlimentary reform, it is not any revolution, or series of revolutions, that will bring Socialism. It is we ourselves who must give it birth after much pain and sorrow, even as a mother —" here the exclusive nature of the audience struck him, and he paused abruptly, until he remembered that he was a prophet, and might use any questionable metaphor he pleased without impropriety — "even as a mother brings forth the child who is to become her joy and her comfort. It is the spirit of altruism that has to be diffused among us, and when we have once realized that the 'will to live' as Schopenhauer

puts it, is the one to be controlled, and that the finest of all things is to die, — that is, of course, to live, — to live for the good of the Commonwealth, then shall we be prepared for the enjoyment of perfect art, and then shall the musician, — that is, of course, the *art* of the musician, — be allowed to exist without such sordid considerations as bread and butter and a roof. I use art in its highest, its only real sense, as meaning music only; such imitative branches as literature and painting will not then be practised. I — I beg your pardon?"

"Please don't stop," urged the gray-eyed girl, who had painted certain hot sunsets and purple mists during her travels on the Continent, and had shown in her face what she thought of the musician's last words, "I would not interrupt for the world. I don't know anything about Socialism, or any of the other things you mention except painting, which is evidently doomed. So pray go on, I find it most entertaining."

And a laugh, in which derision was

plainly discernible, rang out to bear testimony to her words. She evidently did not realize the serious nature of the assemblage in which she found herself, and Mrs. Reginald acquired a distinct antipathy for her when she leaned back in her chair carelessly, and proceeded to argue with Digby as though he were any ordinary young man, with no ideas, and no studio, and no deep and hidden tragedy in his life which could be alluded to darkly whenever the topic of conversation required it. And no one in the room could forgive her when the musician threw himself on the chair at her side, and condescended to parry her objections as though he thoroughly enjoyed the attack she was daring to make upon his favorite principles.

"Do you not see that the language of painting is limited?" he cried. "It has told us all it had to tell; it is not adapted to modern needs and modern craving, though the impressionists have made a fine attempt, a noble attempt, to make it express

more than it can. Do you not see that while music is purely spiritual, purely intellectual, painting is a mere imitation of the common objects of nature?"

"Man and woman being among the common objects?" murmured the girl. But he did not heed her tiresomely obvious remark, and plunged onwards.

"Is not art finer, ten times finer than nature? You cannot see below the surface, you painters who copy nature, poor ignorant nature, who is only on the threshold of knowledge herself. You say you can paint a tree; but when it is done, what is it? A tree!"

"No, it is not only the tree," objected the other, "it is the picture in the artist's mind that the tree makes. When you and I look at a tree we see two different things, — apparently; and as I live in the country most of the year, I am thankful I am not a musician. Voilà tout!"

"But even then? You can put into your picture none of the workings of the

human mind, none of the aspirations of the human soul. When you have a great happiness or a great sorrow, does it help you to paint your pictures? No, no, your painting is apart from your existence, your mind has no place there. In the future we shall have but one art, and that art will be music!"

"Oh, Mr. Raleigh!" laughed the girl, "you are making a world for one kind of people. What will happen to the poor luckless ones like myself who are not musical? I suppose there will have to be some in your world?"

"Je n'en vois pas la nécessité," said the musician, relaxing into a laugh too; but Mrs. Routh, who had never read Voltaire, thought it was quite time to interfere when she could not even understand what they were saying, and she dropped her parasol. Digby stooped to pick it up, and she asked him promptly to play something.

The spell was broken, and the chorus round the room echoed the request. The

musician smiled in a forced manner, and said he would play the thirty-seven variations of Beethoven.

"Oh, no, something of your own," begged the chorus.

"Yes, please, Mr. Raleigh, something full of the workings of the human mind and the aspirations of the human soul," said the girl, merrily; and as the musician sat down and began to play, she again shocked everybody by walking round the room and examining the photographs.

"How exquisite, how emotional!" cried the easily moved Mrs. Reginald when he had finished.

"Is he not bound to get on?" said the other upholders of altruism. But the musician did not seem to hear them, for he crossed over to the girl by the bookshelves.

"Now tell me," she said, hardly lowering her voice, "is it possible to compose anything that would express the aspirations of Mrs. Reginald Routh's soul? That is she, is it not, the one in the black silk who

glares at me and is so maternal to you? Oh, I shall never understand the language of music; I wonder if you find the language of painting as difficult, and if that is why you have acquired such an unflattering opinion of it?"

"May it not be because I have as yet seen none of your sketches?" he said gallantly; but she shrugged her shoulders and turned away.

"What stacks of photographs you have. Cleverly arranged too, I see: pupils in evening dress from twenty to twenty-five on the piano; pupils with long hair and pinafores on the mantelshelf with the pipe-racks; mammas in velvet and fur behind the fern-pots. Ah, the workings of the musical mind are most subtle. Good-bye; I suppose I shall see you down at the Manor on Saturday?"

"I hope to run down for the week end; I have not seen my people for months. And perhaps I may have an opportunity of converting you yet! Is your carriage here?"

"Who is she?" asked some one, when the musician had followed her into the hall.

"Don't ask me, dear," said Mrs. Reginald, with her habitual smile, "I am quite unacquainted with the person."

"Poor Mr. Raleigh, I quite felt for him," said another; "but how chivalrous he is! No one would have suspected how much her impertinence was torturing his sensitive nature."

"I should not call her impertinent myself," said Mrs. Reginald, charitably, "I think it is merely want of breeding. Provincial, I should say. Some friend of the family perhaps; I have heard — that is to say, Mr. Digby has often talked to me of his home in the country. Strange that so many of our greatest men should have come up from the provinces. Take — take Händel, for instance, or even Charlotte Brontë."

"What a pretty girl, Mr. Raleigh; who is she?" asked the first speaker, when the musician returned, with rather a conscious look on his face.

"Ah, yes, charming, is n't she? She is Lady Joan Relton, the Relton Court family, you know; came into the title unexpectedly through the death of a great-uncle. Not much wealth, I believe; no doubt, all the money has been squandered by her worthless and immoral ancestors," he added, remembering his prophet's mantle in time to justify his momentary interest in the aristocracy. "Will you give us another song, Mrs. Routh?"

And, the room having been cleared, as it were, of the heretical element, the atmosphere of music once more settled down solidly on that studio in the West End.

CHAPTER II.

Squire Raleigh was a philanthropist. But philanthropy in town is a costly amusement, and Squire Raleigh had a large family, whose claims could not comfortably be ignored in favor of charitable institutions, although a philanthropist with a love for mankind cannot be expected to do as much for his own children as an ordinary domesticated egoist. Nevertheless, after the endowment of an orphan asylum, and the failure of a Liberal newspaper speculation, and the gift of a public park to the people had been followed by the reduction of his income to one-third of its original value, the vigorous reformer yielded to the persuasions of his sons and his lawyers and retired to his country estate, with a knighthood, a troublesome liver, and a firm

resolve to get to the bottom of the land question.

At Murville Manor, an old Georgian house standing near a quaint little village in one of the home counties, Sir Marcus Raleigh once more tried to forget the disagreeable facts of an income with decreasing resources and a family of increasing claims, and plunged into fresh philanthropic schemes, this time relating to small holdings, and the growth of potatoes for the million, and the advancement in general of the agricultural laborer. Such energy naturally brought the enthusiast into collision with his own farming tenants, who liked to preserve the monopoly of grumbling to themselves, and although not hesitating to complain of the difficulties of making their land pay, yet objected strongly to having small portions of it wrested from them and given to their own laborers instead, who throve upon them straightway. It likewise bred strained relations between the Squire and the old rector, who in his

own way of Sunday-schools, and coal clubs, and relief funds, was a philanthropist of an old world form, and could not understand why the traditional supporter of church charities should prefer to invent charities of his own and allow the church to fall into debt meanwhile. His family also, who had not inherited philanthropic tendencies, failed to appreciate the unselfishness of their father in this direction, and complained with the grossest individualism of the want of pocket money. They complained, too, of being forced to exchange a town life, where they could at least sink their father's personality in the oblivion of society, for a country one, where it was impossible to remain unknown for miles round, where philanthropy was cheap and therefore more rife than before, and where a large staff of men-servants was replaced by a so-called handy man. The handy man, by the way, in spite of advertising himself in the county paper as competent to look after "pony, cart, garden, boots, knives, fifteen shillings a

week, Sundays, and beer," had as yet shown no decided talent in any of these particulars, except in the last-mentioned one.

Among a mass of other inconsistencies, which almost likened him to a schoolboy who is having a romp through life instead of playing the game seriously, the Squire, while considering his children in the light of impedimenta, yet cherished a passionate affection for the least worthy of them all, for the one to whom nature had decreed that he should bequeath, with a liberality he had shown his children in no other respect, the largest share of his own failings. Jack Raleigh was handsome, fascinating, improvident to a degree, with no fixed code of morality and no definite powers of reasoning, ruling himself and his actions entirely by a kind of blind instinct such as we find in healthy animals or in children. His love, like his antipathy, was of an elementary character; if he found himself in a complicated situation, which was not rare, he would merely choose the most pleasant

course open to him, without giving it a moment's consideration, and would follow it gayly until another obstacle arose which would have to be treated in a similar manner. Whether he was the happier for feeling nothing deeply, belongs to those questions which are argued by thousands of lives every day without a conclusive answer being found to them. That his temperament was the sunnier for it and that his misdeeds were less harmful, is most certain; and since the God whom he believed in, if he believed in one at all, was a kind of inexhaustible Being who could offer him as many fresh opportunities as he had squandered already, and seemed to be the cause, in some indirect way that Jack never attempted to fathom, of occasional magnificent music in churches and cathedrals, his religion as well as his excellent digestion saved him from the fits of depression that usually accompany the sanguine disposition. He had discovered before he was out of his teens that England

was not the place for one so restless as he, and he had been sent out to more than one colony "to try his luck," as the Squire said, in a vague hope of shifting his uneasy responsibility for his son's actions on to fortune. But fortune, although not philanthropic in her tendencies, and having no nobler vocation to distract her from her plain duty of looking after her prodigal sons, refused to help him, and he inevitably returned home with more debts, more friends, more anecdotes, but no more stability than before.

It was on a dull morning in July, at breakfast time, that Jack caused his father for the hundredth time to recognize his existence in an unpleasant manner. It was an unfortunate time for his letter to arrive, for there was a mist that day, and as Sir Marcus was profoundly ignorant both of meteorology and the crops, and pretended to be an authority on both, he chose to feel injured because Helen assured him that it was not going to rain, and that his hay was

not going to be spoiled. To which the Squire, who never could endure the plain truths of his eldest daughter, replied testily that the mist did mean rain, that his hay was going to be spoiled as it always was, and that he himself was a ruined man; he then sat down at the now silent table and sighed in a dejected manner. Presently, finding that no one was looking at him, he roused himself partially, and made a hearty breakfast behind his newspaper; and when the conversation around him was once more in full swing he condescended to look at his letters. He opened Jack's first, as he always did. It was the old story, told in the boy's usual careless manner: Canada had grown too small for him, he was feeling homesick, and was about to sail for England, and would be with his father almost as soon as his letter, to which effect he was his loving son Jack.

It was not the first letter of the kind that the Squire had received from the same source, and he knew what this one meant:

Jack would be back again before the week was out, with an accumulation of debts and not a dollar in his pocket, Jack, with his sunny smile, and his nonchalance, and his utter unconsciousness of offence. Jack meant money, family meant money, and Sir Marcus was close upon overdrawing his banking account already, and had promised a large subscription only the day before to the building fund of the village reading-room. If there had been no stranger present he would have relieved his feelings by a characteristic outburst; but Lady Joan sat opposite to him and saw as much as she wished to see without raising her eyes from her plate, and he felt instinctively that he might merely succeed in making himself ridiculous if he spoke before the opportunity occurred; and, impetuous man as he was, something he could not define restrained him from creating a situation just then which should not be dignified. So he read the letter over again, and he listened mechanically to the conversation of his

offending children, without heeding what they said.

"After all," Digby was saying, with a gravity which the subject hardly merited, for in the heart of his own family, although he still remained the prophet, yet he refrained from provoking the serious discussions which were only fitting within the sacred walls of the studio, "after all, it does not matter how bad a fellow is, if he is only artistically so, I mean if he will only be thorough over it."

"It does not matter how wicked we all are, so long as we can see the humor of sin. To be able to laugh at ourselves is the great thing," murmured Lady Joan.

"There is nothing so depressing," continued the musician, without heeding the interruption, "as the spectacle of a man who will not face his own wickedness — or even his own goodness. It is a sign of the age, this wretched spirit of compromise; we don't live in town because it is unhealthy, and the fogs are so bad —"

"My dear, that was not the reason," Lady Raleigh murmured — also unheeded.

"— and we don't live in the country because it is too far to come up to the concerts; so we live at Crouch End or Putney, where an exasperating local railway lies between us and St. James's Hall, and where the ends of the fogs hang about for days. We have n't the pluck to say yea or nay; we leave all our decisions to the gods, who throw them back upon us again, or to — to fate, who only plays with us at will; we would do anything to shirk the responsibility of the ego. Look at Helen, now; the bent of her character is towards religion, yet she hesitates to go into a convent. Therefore her religion does not make her picturesque."

"Digby! How *can* you argue at breakfast time? And I think you might keep your horrid atheistical notions to yourself before the children," cried Helen, crossly. She had not recovered from her passage of arms with the Squire.

Digby plodded on with his breakfast and his theory.

"We are all the same, as a family. Take the father: he would lay down his life for the working-man, or he thinks so; and yet he is afraid to go in for Socialism, which offers the only solution to the labor question. It is an age of compromise; we are all cowards."

"Digby is so fond of taking his own particular failings and generalizing them," said the still ruffled Helen to nobody in particular.

"People with decided opinions, picturesque people, as you call them, are people with fads; and I hate people with fads," said Lady Joan, "they are ten times more uninteresting than the weathercock sort of people who make compromises. Why should you always behave as if you went by clockwork? It is far too much trouble when, after all, nothing matters. And why do you want to be quarrelling with the age perpetually? It seems a nice com-

fortable sort of age to me; I suppose it has a different aspect for musical people."

Digby's end of the table was always the most popular whenever he was at home, which was not often enough to spoil his reputation, — more popular at all events than the other end, where Lady Raleigh insisted on making the tea, and made it very badly, and where the Squire opened his letters and found they were mostly bills. If his eldest son had not been monopolizing the conversation on this morning in particular, the efforts of Sir Marcus to make a sensation by sighing deeply and rustling the letter in his hand might have succeeded in attracting some notice; but as it was, he was quite unheeded, and his wife went on spilling the milk behind the urn, and filling up the teapot with water which had boiled half an hour ago, while the noisy chatter was carried on uninterruptedly round Digby and Lady Joan.

"Of all forms of self-indulgence, unintel-

ligent self-sacrifice is the most degrading. Somebody says that the time of the clever people is taken up in undoing the harm done by the good people."

"By the stupid people," objected Helen brusquely.

"That is just the point," began Digby, vigorously; but his mother's complaining voice broke in upon the conversation.

"What *is* to be done, Helen? Have you heard, my dear? Mrs. Bates says she cannot let me have more than three pounds of butter a week. Did you ever know anything more provoking? Oh, the difficulty of getting dairy produce in the country! Why did we ever leave Cadogan Square?"

Perhaps country life was more trying to Lady Raleigh than to any other member of her family; for, with the inconsequence of woman, she could not forgive her husband for selling their London house, although herself the first instigator of the scheme. To remind him continually of

the fact that the place did not agree with her, she refused to trust herself to the handy man's whip, and never walked further than the garden gate, by which means she preserved her constitution admirably, and ruined her nervous system; and in this unhealthy condition of mind she shut herself up in Murville Manor, where her sole occupations became the mismanagement of her household, and the perusal of the illustrated papers.

Her last remark caught the Squire's ear, and gave him the opportunity he wanted.

"*Why* did we leave Cadogan Square, Lettice?" he shouted, wheeling round upon her suddenly. "I will tell you why, if you can't see for yourself by merely looking down the table. Because I am a poor man, Lettice; because I have a large family that would swallow up any income; because it is money, money, all day long, until I feel I can't give a shilling to a poor laboring man to — to improve his mind and — and his position, without feeling,

without feeling extravagant, in short." — The Squire always found that his philanthropic sentiments did not sound nearly so effective in his own home as when thundered forth from a rickety platform in the village schoolroom; the family circle is at all times a great leveller, and his constant terror of the ridiculous brought him swiftly back to the present actual grievance: "Do you ask me *why*, when I receive a letter like this from the son I have loved and educated and denied myself for? I will tell you why, if you like, Lettice. Because I am not a millionnaire, Lettice; because I have four sons doing nothing but spend money; because Jack, confound the fellow, is in England at the present moment, and may be here to-day — "

Lady Raleigh gave a little scream, and possessed herself of the offending letter. The children began to ask innumerable questions in hushed voices, the elder ones looked dejected, and Lady Joan sipped her coffee with an exaggerated look of uncon-

cern on her face, and a twinkle in the gray eyes which all the powers of dissimulation that she possessed could not quite conceal.

"He does not say he is in debt," said Lady Raleigh, through a mist of joyful tears.

Sir Marcus twisted his napkin into a tangle and threw it on the floor.

"Say?" he cried, striding towards the door; "don't I know what he means, the rascal? I tell you I've done with him for once and for always; he shall enter my house no more; and if he comes here with his intolerable impudence, I shall show him the door. It is right that I should make an example of him, whatever it costs me to do it; and though he is my own son I will harden my heart and do it. Not a penny more shall he get out of me; I wash my hands of him and his debts; it is my — my duty as a father to — to do it, in short, and you may tell him so when he comes, the young scapegrace!"

And with a sense almost of relief at hav-

ing found a justifiable reason for avoiding this fresh trouble, and moreover a lurking suspicion that any such reason was wholly ineffectual to prevent Jack from coming home, Sir Marcus flung himself out of the room and banged the door.

"Jack ought to be ashamed of himself; how can he expect papa to do any more for him?" said the implacable Helen. There is a kind of religious woman who, although she is a woman and although she is religious, is a slave to her own ideal of justice.

"Helen, don't be unjust," complained her mother, wiping her tears, and alive to half-a-dozen sensations at the same instant; "the dear boy cannot help being fond of his home, so sweet and affectionate of him. Dear Lady Joan, you must pay no heed to what Sir Marcus said just now; he does not mean all he says, you know, and he was just a little startled by the suddenness of dear Jack's decision; it is my husband's way of hiding his real emotion. I'm sure I don't know why he should make so much

fuss over a trifle when we have so many real troubles to bear. — Now, my *dear* Digby, you know I do not allow smoking in the dining-room; how can you be so unkind as to add wilfully to all my worries? I shall have a headache for certain, now. — Tom, darling, open the window, and try to get the horrid smell out; I feel distracted! And has any one seen my key-basket?"

"When will Jack be here, I wonder?" observed Digby, holding the offending cigarette out of the window, and trying to hide by a supreme indifference his consciousness at that moment that a prophet is without honor in his own country. Lady Joan, from a studied attitude on the wide old window seat, was not in the least deceived by his manner, and laughed clearly and mockingly.

"Oh, the dear boy," said Lady Raleigh, in a restored and cheerful tone, "to think that he may come at any moment, and there is no ale in the house. Helen, you must write at once, and, dear me! we must watch for every footstep all day; and there

are the sheets too, — where *is* Nurse? Dear Lady Joan, you must forgive the emotions of a foolish old mother; I assure you I am *never* flurried like this; but even the best of housekeepers would be disturbed by such a sudden event. And he really must not have damp sheets; he has slept in a blanket for two years, he tells me, and damp sheets are *so* dangerous; but he shall have them to-night, bless him! Oh, children! look, look! who is that coming along behind the hedge? Move out of the way, Digby, and don't make so much noise, everybody. Why can't I make myself heard in my own house? Is it — can it — oh, tell me who it is!"

A moment's breathless silence was followed by a shout of laughter as the unmistakable corduroys of the handy man came into view.

"George, George, come here," exclaimed Lady Raleigh; "you must not leave this spot all day long, as Master Jack may be here at any minute. Do you understand? So go into the field at once and get the pony in,

and you had better have him harnessed, all ready to go to the station. And will you go now to the post-office and see if there is a telegram? You might wait there on the chance, or at all events be in readiness. But don't go beyond the grounds, whatever you do. Dear boy, how I love him!"

And perfectly happy in the certainty of everything being properly arranged now that she had given her own orders, Lady Raleigh swept away to arrange a royal feast for the prodigal.

"Please, Mr. Digby, be I to stop here till Master Jack comes?" asked the bewildered George.

Digby laughed quietly, and re-lighted his cigarette.

"If you take my advice, George, do your work as usual, and don't bother about Master Jack. When he does come he won't dream of sending a telegram to say so. That is not Jack's way."

"Will he walk from the station?" asked Lady Joan, carelessly. The others had all

strolled away; and, in the presence of the maid who was clearing away the breakfast things, she felt it incumbent upon her to say something commonplace. Digby, who, being a man, felt no such necessity, looked at the pretty little foot that was swinging backwards and forwards, and wondered why she wanted to know.

"Not he! That is not Jack's way either. He will drive up in a coach and four when we have given up expecting him, and want to know why we did not all go down to the station in a body to meet him. Then there will be a hubbub, and Jack will be king of the house again."

"And you will be dethroned?" she asked maliciously.

He heard the question, and did not notice the malice in it.

"Only until he begins to say why he has come, and the rain has spoiled the hay," he said, with another laugh.

CHAPTER III.

With the peculiar good fortune which has attended the oracle of all ages, Digby's prediction came true, and Jack did come home that evening when every one had stopped talking about him, and there was a universal tendency among his brothers and sisters to avoid the topic of his arrival. It was tea-time, and the Squire was standing in the middle of the drawing-room and allowing himself to be coaxed on to his favorite subjects by certain methods known only to his children; though Lady Joan, with her accustomed shrewdness, and partly from a desire to fall into the spirit of her surroundings, however dull they might be, also lent her aid in drawing him out, and Sir Marcus became a willing and unconscious victim.

"Interested in duck-breeding, did you say?" he exclaimed eagerly; "then you shall see something you can't see in Pont Street or any of your swell West End places," forgetting for the moment his envy of Lady Joan's charming house in town. "You shall come over one of our famous duckeries, and see what you've been eating with green peas all the season, and learn how we breed ducks in Murville. It is n't every one who gets the opportunity of coming to the very centre of the most important village industry in the home counties, and it is quite time you saw how the laboring man is kept from starvation by a little help and a little encouragement. Why, let me tell you, though I am a modest man, God knows, and it is not I who should say it, that if it had not been for my letters to the papers, the duck interest would have completely died out in Murville long ago. And where would the working-man have been then? Do you know, my dear young lady, that I, that is, Murville, or rather, I

should say, my letter to the county paper has been quoted in the 'Daily Liberal'? There 's fame for you! You did n't know you had come to such a world-renowned place, eh? Ah, we are not so hidden in Murville, after all; that is, the — the cause of the elevation of the laborer has its opportunities even in a small village like this."

"Even a duck has its portion in the scheme of Providence," murmured Lady Joan into her tea-cup; "I wish I could find out all these wonderful things for myself, they are so improving. For instance, I shall never mind paying a guinea a couple in February, now that I know I shall be doing a great national good by buying them."

"You have got hold of quite the wrong idea," interrupted Digby, "a most anti-socialistic idea, of which I could not believe even *you* to be capable. As if the luxury of the rich could be of the least avail — "

A jaded expression crept over the visage

of Helen at this point, and his younger brothers irreverently urging him to "play lightly, as they had heard that old wheeze before," the derided prophet merely regretted the absence of bears, and smiled sadly. His father gladly filled up the breach.

"Eh, what? Socialism, did you say? Of course it is Socialism in its noblest form, when — when we get a notice in the 'Daily Liberal,' and without paying for it too! It was none of your cooked-up jobs, carried through with bribery and corruption, let me tell you, it was all fair and above board; Editor 's a personal friend of mine, don't you see, and *he* would n't have quoted from my letter if he had n't thoroughly appreciated it. You can't get over facts with any amount of Socialism; give me facts, that 's what I always say," concluded Sir Marcus, happily innocent that all his life his one aim had been to avoid facts and the unpleasant truths they had forced upon him.

"I can hear wheels," said Lady Raleigh, suddenly. As she had made the same remark at intervals during the day, no one paid her any particular attention except Helen, who put out a protecting hand to the tea-table, as if she anticipated a rush. This time, however, there was undoubtedly a carriage coming up the drive; and Lady Raleigh rose to her feet unsteadily, and became melodramatic.

"I can feel it is my boy," she said, winding her shawl tightly round her; "come to him, Marcus, come to our long-lost child."

"Don't make a fool of yourself," growled Sir Marcus, bluntly; he had suddenly resigned his position in the middle of the room, and was sitting uncomfortably on the edge of the sofa instead; "he 's only been away two years, and there 's no more chance of his being lost than there is of your going a five-mile walk."

He felt he had fired a double shot by his remark; but there came a yell from the children on the doorstep, and his wife swept

out of the room with theatrical movements, and Sir Marcus felt more uncomfortable than before.

"Leave him to me, children; let me have my boy's first kiss," cried Lady Raleigh, in the hall.

"Just look," said the practical Helen, from the window: "he has hired Bunce's best trap, and we have n't paid his bill for two quarters."

Lady Joan sat, and turned over the leaves of a magazine with her eyes discreetly lowered, and wished that the means of escape were not so completely cut off, and that she could get into the garden. Family jars were intensely amusing to her critical nature; but after a whole day of them she felt that she could reasonably dispense with any more just now, and, from the Squire's attitude, another storm was evidently brewing.

"Had n't you better come out, sir?" suggested Digby.

"No, sir, I will not come out," answered

Sir Marcus, with a show of determination. "Have I not already told you that I have done with the rascal forever? I meant what I said, sir, and I will not see him nor speak to him; he — he can go to some one else to pay his debts!"

And, unconscious that he had put more feeling into the end of his speech than into anything else he had said, the Squire looked at his son and his daughter as if vaguely imploring them to support him in the step he had taken. In his most impetuous actions Sir Marcus always looked for a supporter. Yet, much as Digby admitted the justice of his father's anger, and much as Helen might censure the prodigal herself, there was too much of the *esprit de corps* in them that ran through the blood of all the Raleighs and made them a formidable enemy to the outsider, to allow them to acquiesce in the Squire's resentment; and he shifted his ground a little and tried another stratagem.

"Don't you see the trouble and the

misery that is coming upon me through the extravagance of this young scamp? How is it you are so short-sighted, so dense about it? I tell you he is *ruining* me, this Jack you are all so fond of; and in ruining me he is taking the bread out of your own mouths, and out of the mouths of your brothers and sisters. Hey? Do you see now?"

And finding that mercenary argument did not produce the effect he wanted, Sir Marcus fled from the sound of voices coming dangerously near, and beat a sheepish retreat into his library on the opposite side of the hall.

"It is curious," said Digby, in his oratorical way, "how the father can forgive anything but want of solid success. He does n't care a hang that Jack has been the most popular fellow in the colony, but if he had made his pile and had something to show for his popularity, then he would proclaim it on the housetops. What a curious age it is, and how we love to judge by results!

By the way, Jack will have a warm time if the father keeps it up, won't he?"

Even the prophet has to drop into the colloquial sometimes.

"Good thing too, it's what he wants," said the inconsistent Helen; and they both glanced at the expressionless face of Lady Joan as she scanned the article on "Chinese architecture," and they left her to go and join the throng in the porch.

In the library on the other side of the hall stood Sir Marcus, his back to the door and his feet set very square on the hearth-rug, trying to drown the noise of welcome in the porch by rustling the newspaper in his hands loudly, while he kept his eyes obstinately fixed on the Premier's speech on fruit-growing for the million.

"Capital speech, capital speech," he said out loud, beginning it vaguely for the third time; "what I have always said myself in fact, but I never could get anybody to listen to me. Why — why the devil are they making such a row in the garden?" — as

the window became darkened by the passing of many figures — "coming into the hall, are they? Let them come into the hall by all means, *I* can't stop them, it's no longer my own house, I suppose; but they sha'n't come in here anyhow; I hope I have a remnant of authority left — and — eh, what? is that the beggar laughing? bless him! — that is, confound his impudence! what right has he to laugh when I don't mean to forgive him? I — I 've been a weak fool all my life, but I 'm not going to give in this time; it — it 's a duty I owe to the younger ones to make an example of him, whatever it costs me to do it; not that it costs me anything, of course, not anything at all, of course; he — he has forfeited my love, the — the rascal, and I *won't* give in this time. Why — why the devil don't they stop his laughing when I mean to cast him off? Pack of women and children, with no sense of the responsibilities of life! — " the columns began to vanish into mist, and the hall seemed filled

with one shout of laughter; the Squire gasped and recovered himself — "It 's my duty as a father to withhold my forgiveness; what else is a poor man to do when he has such an enormous family? A mountain of debts at his back, I 'll be bound, and he thinks he is going to get round me to pay them all — as if I would n't help him if I could, bless his — hang his improvidence! but when there are eleven of them — such absurdity on the part of Lettice, always told her it was an unnecessary thing to have such a tribe of them; but there! no one ever has listened to me, and now they must bear the consequences among them. Wh — what? who 's that at the door? There 's no one in here, I tell you, the — the room 's empty, and I don't mean to see you — I 'm not going to be made a fool of when I 've kept it up all day — why does n't he go away, eh?"

The Squire's voice had sunk into a whisper, and the "Daily Liberal" shook like a leaf in the breeze.

"And the dear old guv, where is he? Why does n't he come out as he always does? Has n't any one told him I am here?"

"I tell you this is my room; it is n't much that belongs to me, except five sons doing nothing, and six unmarried daughters, but — but this room is my property, and I won't have any one in, I tell you — what a fool I was not to lock the door — eh, what? who 's that, eh? Damn the looking-glass!"

There was a mirror over the fireplace, and the fireplace was opposite the door. It was too much for Sir Marcus; if the boy had shown the least sign of shame, of nervousness at meeting him, it would have been easier to keep up a semblance of anger; but, as usual, Jack's bluntness of vision saved him where finer instincts would have been his ruin.

"Hullo, father, here I am! All right, father? I say, is n't it awfully jolly to be together again, eh, father?"

The premier's speech on fruit-growing for the million fluttered down into the coal scuttle; and the Squire wiped his spectacles violently, and gave in to the fascination of the single man who never worked. And when Digby strolled in ten minutes later, he found the prodigal filling his father's pipe with Canadian tobacco, and telling him American anecdotes, while the little room resounded with their laughter.

"Come in, Digby, and listen to this fellow," said Sir Marcus, jovially; "did you ever know such a fellow as Jack? It's a pity *you* don't try America, Digby, it would do you a world of good, man!"

Digby accepted the situation and his eviction with a laugh, not only because, as he had said to Lady Joan, he knew he would be received back into favor again on the morrow when the fascination of the prodigal would have exhausted itself for the time, but also from a lurking hope that he would at last have some chance of talking to their fair guest, whom the Squire had as yet en-

tirely monopolized, in the way he usually monopolized any stranger who would lend a willing and fresh ear to his hobbies. But the musician did not get his chance that evening, though he tried very hard for it. Jack's return proved but a doubtful assistance to him: to begin with, it caused an alteration in the dinner-table, by which he found himself out of the range of her conversation; it also made the conversation in the drawing-room afterwards more hoplessly general than ever, for they all sat round in a circle and listened to the American anecdotes, and when the American anecdotes flagged for a moment Digby had to go to the piano and play the returned wanderer's favorite airs, while the hero himself took the opportunity of opening a desperate flirtation with Lady Joan under cover of the crashing chords of his eldest brother.

The musician was full thirty years old, and had been in love almost as many times as he had photos in his West End studio; like his father, it was only the trifling circum-

stances of life, or its visions, that seemed to him to be worthy of serious consideration, and like his father he had retained his boyish temperament past the age when such a temperament is sufficient for the demands of circumstance. From the first his connection with Lady Joan had been unusual. She had not begun by fascinating him, and he had not begun by giving her singing-lessons. She was one of the few people of his acquaintance who knew of that secret marriage of his which had left him a widower three years ago, with a baby son whom Sir Marcus would not acknowledge, and who did not regard it either as a boyish entanglement from which his wife's death had luckily released him, or as a reason for abstaining from future marriage altogether. Not that she had any definite views on the subject of boyish entanglements or second marriages, for Lady Joan never had definite views on anything, they were too much trouble to defend, and she would not have taken up any position which would not lend

itself to modification on occasion; but she was unconventional, and she knew it, and in spite of her boast that she was a woman of the world, there was enough of the school-girl in her to give her an exquisite delight in shocking other people who were not unconventional. So hers was the only hand that was held out to Digby when he came to Relton after his wife's death, in search of a home for his child; and it was she who braved the many-tongued slander of an idle country town, and helped him to find what he wanted in the motherly landlady of the "Relton Arms," with whom he could leave the boy in safety. The arrangement necessarily brought him constantly to Relton, when he was naturally prompted by gratitude and courtesy to leave his card at the Hall; but it was some time before she began to have any real interest for him. It was true that she was a beautiful woman, but her beauty and her wit were of a subtle kind, unlike the obvious and doll-like charms that usually attracted him in women; she

showed him that she found him interesting, but she did not adore him like his other lady friends, and she disputed his dicta, and she did not understand his music. After a time these very differences drew them together, and they passed into the desperately dangerous stage of friendship, in which the man had to confess to himself that he was again in love, and the woman had to ask herself if he meant anything, and whether she was to continue to be natural and pleasant to him, or whether the time had come for her in the eyes of society to avoid him and pretend she did not care for him. Lady Joan, hating the laws of society, and dreading still more the chain of another man's will, broke the connection at this point and went abroad for a year, and was away long enough for Digby to fall in and out of another hot love affair, and returned on the day of his reception in the studio to find him rather more interesting than before, and herself made weaker in her resolution by a year's sojourn with a lady companion. Digby on his part was

persuading himself that her return to England had caused the revival of his old love, and that this attachment which had begun so coldly and forced itself into his heart by the most estimable instincts of gratitude and friendship, was superior to all the other attachments of his life, which had begun with infatuation and ended with indifference, and was therefore to be cherished as the only real feeling he had ever had for any woman.

"I'm not the sort of man to be a bachelor," he said to himself earnestly, somewhere about midnight that evening, as he leaned out of his bedroom window and smoked a cigarette meditatively. "Some fellows ought never to marry; I told Dick Stephens so when he got engaged, and he was separated from his wife within a year of their marriage. But I am not like Dick Stephens. I am really a most domesticated sort of man, and it is time I settled down. I am tired of being a Bohemian; every wretched little pygmy who writes ballads and lets his hair grow and does n't wash, is

a Bohemian. And there is the boy, too ; he ought to have a mother of course, poor little chap : we both want a woman about us, don't we, Sonny ? Yes, there is no doubt that it is my duty to Sonny to marry very soon."

In the room above, among the cushions on the sofa, lay Lady Joan with her hair down and a fan in her hand, opposite a full-length mirror ; in her most secret moments Lady Joan liked to assure herself that she played the part picturesquely.

"I like him. He is fresh, and original, and amusing. He does n't bore me, and I can flirt with him — safely. He has no theories about things, and he does not want to upset creation, and he does n't take life so desperately seriously. It is such a blessing to meet some one who is content with the age as it is — bah ! what a smell of tobacco smoke !"

And she rose, shut the window with a bang, and went to bed, where she slept soundly till the morning.

"It is curious," murmured the musician,

lighting another cigarette, "how Fate seems to have propelled her towards me at every crisis of my life; just after Mary died, for instance, and again before I met Norah! — poor little Norah! and then again the other day, when I really had made up my mind to go to Africa, and she came back from the Continent in time to prevent me. And now — ah, I believe I could write that song now."

And he went to the writing-table and tried to set some impassioned words of Swinburne to music; but although the situation demanded that he should have been specially inspired, he found himself incapable of writing a note, and had to give up the task in despair.

"My brain is overwrought; I am not going to sleep to-night," he said, and put the bromide by his bedside.

After that he also shut the window and went to bed, where he likewise slept soundly till the morning.

CHAPTER IV.

THE "Relton Arms" had the reputation of being the most respectable inn in the little country town of Relton. It had no particular right to this title, being smaller and more shabby than the "Red Lion" down the street, which was a modern innovation run by a speculator from the neighboring market-town, and promised particular advantages to cyclists which they never quite seemed to reap; but it had outlived generations of Reltons up at the old Court, and it bore their family escutcheon on its sign-board, and all the club dinners were held in its oak-panelled parlor; and the frequent presence of the rector on occasions when alcohol was banished from the table had naturally helped it to keep up its reputation. The fallacy was maintained equally

strangely by the silence of its landlord, who only grew more taciturn as he grew more intoxicated, while the people who were fond of talking, notably his wife, made capital out of his silence and applauded him for it, so that he too became respectable in the eyes of Relton. And never having been known to contradict any one in his life, respectable he accordingly consented to remain.

It was on a sultry, still afternoon towards the end of the summer that Roger Brill, the comely rat-catcher of the town, raised the latch of the "Relton Arms" about tea-time.

"Mornin', missus," said he.

"And I'm sure it's mornin' to you, Muster Brill, notwithstandin' it's being arternoon by time o' sun, which be a foolish difference to make among old acquaintance; but there, there's a deal too much talkin' about trifles in my thinkin'. And be you ready for a cup of tea, lad, or be it the usual you'll be wantin'?"

Without waiting for the reply, which had been the same, like the question, for the last fifteen years, the bustling landlady hastened forward with a chair and sent her obedient husband for the beer. One of the most remarkable phases of a monotonous incident is the way in which some people contrive to give it the appearance of novelty. Mrs. Haxtell belonged to such a class, and it did not in the least disturb her method that her husband had usually filled the pewter pot before she had finished inviting her customer to have it. But old Peter was a man of deeds, not words, and he chose for his part to make the transaction a purely business one, though he allowed his wife to hide it with a veneer of hospitality if she would. And this she generally did in the most feminine and transparent manner possible, until the time for payment came, when she would meekly retire under cover of her sex, and leave her husband to battle with the creditor.

"Good sport to-day, lad?" asked Peter presently.

"Aye, for sure," answered Roger; and then, glancing professionally at the row of dead rats that hung from his waist, he added slowly, "more ways nor one."

"Eh," said Peter, with a slight access of emphasis.

They all knew something more was coming, and Mrs. Haxtell's knowledge of the rat-catcher's temperament sufficed to keep her breathlessly silent in view of coaxing him to tell his news; though, with the jealousy of the reformed thief who hates to see his brother continuing to thieve, she glanced imploringly at her husband and daughter, who had no intention of speaking, as if to silence them likewise.

"Lady Relton's Dick came down my way last night," began Roger, deliberately filling his pipe.

So far his news came within the ken of his audience, and they were quick to maintain a share in it.

"I saw him myself, I did," began Lily Eliza; but her mother promptly took up the tale.

"Lady Relton's Dick? Eh, but he come along nigh after sunset, he did, and he says to my man, he says, 'Seen Muster Brill?' he says. And my man told him, he did, as ye worn't long gone home, not to call it short neither, nor yet very long; leastways ye were gone along home, he said, did n't ye, Pete? Speak up, man, and say what ye know, and doan't sit starin' as though heavin and earth worn't big enough for your eyes to look into."

"Woman," said Peter, with unusual effort, "heaven and earth bain't big enough for your tongue to clapper in, nor yet they would n't be if t' other place was joined on too."

Here Roger struck in afresh.

"Lady Relton's Dick said the rats in the stable worn't worth their keep. Lady Relton told him she 'd pay the corn for the horses, but the rats would have to go else-

where if they wanted good grain, as she did n't intend for 'em to have hers. I said I 'd go to-morrow, being promised to Farmer Wadsden's ricks to-day; but Dick, he says the world has to stop a turnin' round for my lady, he says, and she were in a taking along of them rats, so to-day I took the pup along and I went up to the Court."

"Ah," gasped the landlady; she had not meant to interrupt, but the approach of the pith of the story was too much for her, and with the desperate economy of the schoolboy, who leaves the biggest plum to the last, she again diverted the channel of conversation.

"Lady Relton's Dick fetched a gentleman from the station this mornin', and he took him back again an hour past. I knows he did, seeing as I was washing the precious baby's face, or was I hanging out Mrs. Walker's wash? when the dog-cart come by. Was it the gentleman as ye saw up at the Court, Muster Brill?"

Few sights are more melancholy than

that of a man who has been robbed of his story by another; and good-natured Roger Brill pushed back his chair at this second interruption, and rose to his feet with something like offended dignity.

"If ye want to have the talkin' to yourself, missus, I be going to clear out. Cause why? It bain't reasonable to tell a body somethin' fresh when the body have heard it afore, and I ain't the man to spoil t' other body's tale, so good arternoon to ye."

But here Peter became peacemaker.

"Sit ye down, lad, and doan't heed her clapperin' tongue. *I* doan't, and it's clipper-clappered at me this twenty year."

With an effort of generosity the injured Roger recognized a grievance greater than his own, and by drinking the remainder of his beer standing he considered he had compromised his dignity sufficiently to resume his seat and his story.

"Lord, what rats they was!" he exclaimed, his eye kindling at the recollection. "I never could have thought so well of my

lady as that she'd leave 'em to get to that pitch before calling me in. Why, Peter, man, if she'd called me in only a month ago she'd have spoilt the sport summat! but here they was, eaten to bustin' with corn, and no thought of the morrow, as the Holy Scripture says. Eh, but that was a mornin', that was; well, I reckon I'd laid out some dozen or more in the stable yard, when up comes Lady Relton and Mr. Jack." He paused to watch the effect of his superior knowledge on his hearers, chose to ignore the landlady's triumphant whisper, "That's him," and sighed deeply. "I doan't know no more than the dead what business it was of his to come hangin' round my lady, what's all unprotected and alone like, bless her!"

"Nay, indeed," echoed his hearers feelingly.

"More partickler," continued Roger, warmly, and striking his fist on the wooden table till the tea-cups rattled, "more partickler as Mr. Jack be Mr. Raleigh's own

brother, and my lady belongs to Mr. Raleigh if ever she belonged to anybody; and no one can't deny as it 's been my intention to put 'em together this four year come harvest time. No one can't deny it, no one."

"True, lad, true," grunted Peter sympathetically, while his wife cunningly seized the opportunity to interrupt again by appearing to enter warmly into the ratcatcher's disturbed feelings.

"And to think of his precious baby," sniffed Mrs. Haxtell, pouring herself out another cup of tea; "to think of the dear lamb, with no mother and not much father to speak of, passing of his innocent childhood without the woman's care his father ought to give him. I 've no patience with such neglect, though I 'm sure I hope I 've done my best by the child, as I thought to myself only this mornin' when I saw him stuffin' his precious fat cheeks with green plums. It ain't every one would let a child do that!"

Lily Eliza became restive at this point.

"Tell about Mr. Jack, Muster Brill," she urged timidly.

"Daughter," said old Peter, sternly, "it ain't the part of a well-meanin', God-fearin' lass to ask such a question, and if you worn't your mother's own daughter you would n't have such sinful desires to ask 'em."

In her anxiety to hear the rest of the story, the landlady allowed this backhanded attack on her morals to pass unnoticed, and Roger began afresh. "Well, up they comes together, talkin' and laughin' quite friendly like, and my lady says to him, she says, 'Here 's the rats you said I was to have killed,' she says, 'and is n't it a dear little dog?' she says. So I says to her, 'Aye, it be a good pup; it 's killed fourteen since breakfast,' and I seemed to offend her like, for up she gets from where she 'd been patting him, and she looks at Mr. Jack all in a blaze, and she says all angry like, 'That 's what you call sport, is it?' she says. 'Mr. Digby would n't call it sport,' she says."

"No more he would n't," said both the women simultaneously.

"That 's true enough," said Roger, slowly, "but Lady Relton, she bain't the smirking soft kind o' woman what likes to spare the rat and spoil the corn, and I can't rightly make out what 's come over her to-day. She did n't seem herself to-day, not anyhow, and she seemed to take a pleasure in quarrelin' over everything Mr. Jack said, and then she laughed of him, she did. It worn't like my lady, it worn't, to talk soft stuff about killin' rats; that be more like t' other one what come after Mr. Raleigh last springtime, the one what had saucer eyes, and pretended to be fond of the child, with her nasty clingin', pretendin' ways."

The last words were said with biting contempt, and the women sat silent and sipped their tea approvingly. But old Peter had different views concerning the "other one" alluded to, and he again made the effort to interrupt.

"Eh, lad, but you be proper hard upon

poor Miss Norah, proper hard you be, for sure. I would n't be saying as ye have n't your reasons for it, but she seemed a quiet sort of maiden enough, what did n't mean no harm to speak of, and what 's suffered enough for her foolishness, I 'll be bound."

"I hope she has, I hope she has," exclaimed Roger, vehemently. "Those as comes with their sneaking ways tryin' for to corrupt honest folk deserves to suffer for it. No one doan't know why she did n't come back when Mr. Raleigh sent that letter after her, and no one doan't know why she did n't even answer it; but you take my word for it, it was Providence as interposed and would n't have nothink to do with her, and it 's Providence as opens the way now to Mr. Raleigh if he 'd only see it, and not want Providence to come down from heaven and poke him into it, so to speak. Who be that coming across the street?"

"Why, that be Mr. Raleigh his own self, that be," exclaimed Lily Eliza, joyously,

and then blushed for fear of another rebuke from her father. This time, however, she did not get it, for old Peter for business reasons was always anxious to propitiate the musician in the flying visits he paid them, and was far more concerned now in getting to the door in time to open it than in his daughter's back-slidings. Besides, he really liked the open-handed young fellow who paid up so regularly every quarter for the keep of his son without examining the items of the bill, who always came in with a smile and an outstretched hand, and was so inordinately grateful for the little they had done for the child.

"Well, Mrs. Haxtell, and how 's the boy?" he cried with his cheery voice as he stood on the doorstep. "I've brought you a new kind of baccy to try, sir; hope the youngster has been behaving himself, eh? Ah, Roger, how does the world go with you? And where 's my Sonny?"

"There, now, to think of his father coming so unfortunate like, and he that 's never

out at tea-time more than twice in a twelve-month," fussed the landlady, dusting three chairs in succession, and wondering how her back hair was bearing the exertion; "that do seem hard, that do; but there, Lady Relton she come down and asked so coaxing like for him to go that I could n't find it in my heart to refuse her; but that be the first time I 've let him out o' my sight this many weeks. And I 'm sure I 've been so doleful like all the time he 's been gone that I won't never let him go again, that I won't; I kept on thinkin' somethin' was going to happen to the precious, and I would n't never see him again, and what would his father say then, when I 'd promised to look after him like my own — there, Mr. Raleigh, I feel as if somethin' terrible might come to Master Sonny afore we set eyes on him again, that I do!"

"I hope not, Mrs. Haxtell, I hope not," said Digby, encouragingly, wondering if he were a hard-hearted parent because he had none of the landlady's nervous sensations

concerning his son. "It would take a good deal to hurt Master Sonny, I fancy, and he will be in here directly turning everything upside down again to your heart's content. Are you off, Mr. Roger? Then I'll walk home with you, and have a pipe to get rid of the London smoke. Ah! London is not fit for a dog this weather! And will you send the boy down to the castle meadow when he comes in, Mrs. Haxtell? Thanks; let him come alone, and learn to be a man."

Only a few minutes later Lady Joan brought her piebald ponies to a standstill before the sign of the "Relton Arms," and threw the reins to her groom.

"Here we are, Mrs. Haxtell; did you think I was going to keep him altogether? I nearly did, he was so fascinating, and we had such a delightful flirtation together. He is the most charming little gentleman to flirt with, because he is never stupid enough to take it in for a moment. Look at him now," as the boy flew into the land-

lady's arms with a shout. "Oh, you ungrateful little beggar, after all the cake and the jam I have been giving you! Here, give me a kiss, Sonny, and I'll be off. What is it, Mrs. Haxtell? His father, did you say? Oh — yes — to be sure, his father — yes!"

Fortunately for her, the landlady was too much engaged with the stormy caresses of the child to notice her, as she walked to the window and looked at two hens quarrelling over a grain of corn in the yard.

"Aye, my lady, and the child was to go down to the castle meadow all along of himself to find his father, to learn to be a man, was what he said. I bain't one to make a fuss over trifles, but I don't like to let the child go quite, and yet — "

"What nonsense! of course not; how like a man," said Lady Joan, contemptuously, "besides, the child is much too tired to walk all that way. Now for my two kisses, Sonny; I will make it three if you don't give me them at once, sir! I will

go and make it right with his father, Mrs. Haxtell, if you will tell Dick to take the ponies quietly home, please. And may I go across the orchard?"

"Eh, but she doan't care what the townsfolk say, do she?" reflected Mrs. Haxtell, admiringly, as she watched the tall figure disappearing among the trees.

"I wonder what made me come," thought Lady Joan to herself, as she climbed the stile into the castle meadow; and her courage half failed her when she caught sight of a man in a brown felt hat that she had seen before, sitting on a fragment of the old ruined wall by the side of the brook.

But he had already seen her, and was coming towards her; and with a recklessness which she evidenced at once by letting her skirt trail on the damp grass, she went on to meet him.

CHAPTER V.

"THEN marry me," the musician was saying, half-an-hour later. It had not struck him before that she might not possibly want to do so.

"But I have already told you that I do not love you," persisted Lady Joan, who was enjoying herself immensely.

"What does that matter? It will come in time, it is sure to come. Besides, I love you; is not that enough?"

It would have been, to most of his lady friends; but Lady Joan only caught the humor of his words, and laughed derisively.

"You think you are going to put me off by pretending to laugh," he went on patiently; this was to show his superior knowledge of her character; "but the truth is that you dare not be serious, Lady

Joan; why don't you give in to your real feelings and stop making a joke of life just this once?"

"I make a joke of life?" she cried; she was half in earnest now; "how is that possible unless one has realized its sadness? You enthusiasts who have never laughed at anything, and are always talking about taking life seriously, you have never gone deep enough to see that it *is* serious. If you had, you would only laugh for the rest of your life, because — it would be impossible after you had once realized *that* to keep serious and live."

For the first time in his life the musician did not want to argue.

"Don't you see that I love you as I have never loved any one before, as I could never love any one again?" he said humbly.

"How am I to believe that?" she retorted sharply, and he flushed slightly.

"Is that quite fair of you? Have I not been always perfectly open with you? I told you the story of my marriage the first

time I ever met you, and I have told you to-day about poor little No — about Miss Bisley. Could any man do more?"

"No," she said carelessly, "but you might very well have done less, — I mean, the whole town told me about Miss Bisley directly I came home from abroad, though, except for the name, the two accounts do not tally in the least. But then, nothing in Relton shrinks in the washing."

The musician flinched, and tried another tactic.

"Then I suppose you merely think I am a brute who is taking advantage of your loneliness to profess an affection for you which he does not feel? A man has to pay a big penalty for your friendship, Lady Joan."

She would not have let him see it for the world, but she felt she had gone a little too far, and a rapid change came over her mood.

"It is not that; I am afraid of myself, I think," she said with a sigh, and she looked down at his boots.

His face lighted up.

"Then —" he began eagerly; but she put up her hand with a gesture of warning.

"No, no, you mistake me; I do not believe that it is in me to love anybody — for long. My friends say it is because I have never known a mother's love; but if my parents had lived they would simply have made me fight with them through their tiresome affection for me. Now, I know what you are going to say — that I am speaking with the spirit of the age, or some of that twaddle I have heard before. If I am, it is you who have taught it me, for I don't allow anybody else to mention the age to me; I am sick of it and the people who make their living out of abusing it. I could never love you, or anybody. That 's the truth, and — don't you believe me?"

"Not quite," he said, and looked at her in an unpleasantly direct way.

"Besides," she said, rather awkwardly, catching at another loophole of escape,

"there is this Norah Bisley: how am I to know that she will not come back?"

He shook his head, and she smiled at the guilelessness of his reply.

"I don't think it is possible. You see, I wrote three times —"

"The letters may have gone astray."

"The third one I sent by hand, and it was returned to me unopened. I can see now that it is only what I might have expected; she did not have a thought apart from her father, and her father never liked me well enough to look on me in the light of a son-in-law. He took her away directly he suspected our liking for one another, and when they got together and away from me he must have persuaded her to give me up. I wrote to him and I wrote to her, but, as you know, with no avail. She was a lovable little thing, spoiled by her weakness of will, poor little Norah!"

"Poor little Norah!" she echoed half mockingly, and crumbled some mortar off the broken wall and watched it splash into

the water below. She was wondering how it was that she had been more fascinated in half-an-hour by handsome, empty-headed Jack Raleigh than she had been in three long years by this large-hearted musician, with the high forehead and the cavernous eyes, with his passion for metaphysics and Socialism, and his ardent desires to reform society and the world in his own lifetime. Yet she found him interesting sometimes, generally when he was not there and she was thinking about him, and she wondered again why he did not interest her more, and whether she would not have tumbled into a commonplace engagement with him if her parents had been alive and he had been asked to dine at the Court, like any ordinary young man, and she had been forbidden, like any ordinary young woman, to come down to the inn and play with his child. But she had no parents to impose conventionality upon her, and she had gloried in her liberty for twenty-five years, and she was loth to give it up now for the

sake of a man who, she felt sure, would bore her in a week with his desperate enthusiasms, and whom she was not even sure that she loved. No, she could not marry him, she felt sure, and she looked up to say so, and met his restless eyes watching her with such a boy's eagerness that she again went off on a side issue.

"I am not livable with, that is the truth," she said rather weakly, and crumbled some more mortar off the wall, and wished he would not look at her so gloomily. He was thinking that the courtship was not going as smoothly as he expected it would, and beginning dimly to understand that for the only time in his experience he was humbling himself before a woman who was not going to fall a victim to his persuasions; and the discovery did not make him more eloquent nor less humble, though it tended to make him look at the question still more blindly from his own point of view, and he told himself again, obstinately, that he could not live without her for his wife.

"Lady Joan," he said suddenly, "is it me that you dislike, or marriage?"

"Both," she said, and laughed heartily, and became swiftly grave again, and came up to him and took both his hands, an unwonted action that brought the color to his cheeks; "don't you see, my dear friend, that if we were to marry I should plague your life out, and you would never write another note of music, and Mrs. Reginald Routh and all the others would point at me with invective? And you would bore me to the verge of extinction in a month! Of course if you did n't like me it might work better, because then I should have to make you fall in love with me, and that would prevent it from being such a deadly dull affair. Or if I hated you I might do it, because then we could live our separate lives, and there would be nothing to spoil. Don't you see how marriage always spoils things? It is never romantic; it is expedient, that 's all. It does for people who are not fond of one another, or for people who do not feel

such things; but for two people who are in love, and one of them a hypersensitive musician — bah! it would be madness! Not that I am in love, of course."

He chose to ignore the feminine way in which she concluded, and as she dropped his hands and swung away from him, he found himself feeling for his tobacco pouch, and he reflected that the courtship was not much more romantic than the married life she pictured.

"Then you believe in perpetual engagements?" he asked, for the sake of saying something.

"Not a bit of it," she replied gayly, leaning over the broken wall and watching the creatures in the water below; "engagements simply mean all the conventional drawbacks without the moral conveniences. No, there is only one way out of it, and that won't work when you come to examine it."

"And what is that?" he asked, like a man, rashly.

"To marry some one who does n't mat-

ter, and be in love with some one else," she replied carelessly, and kept her face averted.

He rolled up his cigarette and lighted it, and wondered whether women ever discussed among themselves these subjects which they had no diffidence in approaching with men.

"No, it would hardly work, I am afraid," he said slowly. "Lady Joan, it is an absurdly old-fashioned thing to say, but do you know I fancy, after all, that marriage is the only way out of it?"

She turned round and faced him with hot cheeks and angry eyes.

"I think you are merely abusing your privilege as my friend," she cried; "I am not going to stay here for you to draw me out and then — then laugh at me. It is time we closed this — this absurd interview, and I wish — I wish I had known you were here before I started for my walk. Do you suppose that *I* would say anything to *you* that the whole world might not hear?"

He certainly did suppose so from quite

recent experience, but he only apologized humbly for having his meaning mistaken, and allowed her to retrace her steps across the field without uttering any commonplace about meeting again as friends. Perhaps he knew quite well that when they did meet again she would be by far the most self-possessed of the two.

The musician walked back to the inn and tried to persuade himself that he was a disappointed man.

"My engagements never do seem to go right," he thought dejectedly, as he leaned out of the parlor window and looked vaguely among the fruit-trees. The door was pushed open from without, and a rush of red sunshine and childish footsteps came into the room.

"Here I are, daddy! Where is you, daddy? I've been a naughty boy, *welly* naughty Nanny says, 'cos I did n't say grace at tea-time. Why don't *you* never say grace, my daddy? When I are a big man I are n't never going to say grace no

more! Nanny says I are to kiss you free times, and did you bring any sweets for me, daddy?"

"That will do, my son, yes," said Digby, nervously, as the boy clambered on his knee and proceeded to cover him with sticky embraces; "Nanny is always right, of course, but I think twice will be enough. Thanks. The sweets are in this pocket, so you need not turn out all the others. And you must not have any unless you stop jumping."

The musician was not fond of children, and he always imagined his own was going to break his neck or damage himself in some way every time he came into the room. Sonny on his part had his own views concerning this mysterious daddy who came and went so strangely, and who was always going to chastise him severely according to Mrs. Haxtell, but never did anything worse than bring him sweets, and hold him by his sash until he was nearly suffocated.

"And now for my story, daddy," he shouted, with his mouth full of sugar-plums. "Be quick please, my daddy; once upon a time — go on, daddy!"

"Once upon a time," began the musician vaguely, and his thoughts strayed away to the lithesome figure swaying to and fro on the broken wall, and he tried hard to realize his crestfallen condition now that she had refused him.

"Yes, daddy, yes; go on, please, my daddy: are you forgotten the end of my story, daddy dear?" pleaded the restless spirit in his arms.

"Oh, dear, once upon a time there was — there was — oh, confound it all, there was a beautiful lady, was n't there?" he began wearily.

"A booful lady? *Welly* booful, daddy?"

"Very beautiful, my son."

"Oh," solemnly, "and what sort of daddy did she have?"

"Eh, what? Daddy? Oh — she did n't have one," said the musician, oblivious of

morality; he was going through an eloquent speech in his mind which he might have said in the castle meadow if only he had not been so absurdly nervous.

"Oh," said the baby voice, growing shrill with interest, "did n't she never have no daddy at all?"

Of course, thought the musician, if he had said that to her instead of stuttering over a few commonplaces she would have found him irresistible at once.

"Daddy, *dear*," implored Sonny, tugging at his coat suggestively.

"Oh, the devil take the story!" shouted the musician; "did n't I tell you she never had a daddy? Don't ask so many questions, Sonny."

The big blue eyes became tearful at the unusual tone of anger and at the untimely end of the story, and Digby's conscience smote him a little.

"I are n't crying, only little girls cry," gasped the child between his hardly suppressed sobs. "I was only just thinking,

daddy, what a welly funny booful lady she were, daddy."

"Yes, my son," said the musician, very much in the tone of respect he would have used to a man of his own age who was battling with some terrible grief, "yes, my son, she was a very funny beautiful lady, so funny that daddy could not understand her at all, although he loved her so much. And she laughed at daddy, and would n't be kind to him, though she was kind to the whole world besides."

The musician almost choked with his own emotion this time; but Sonny jumped up and down with glee at having at last discovered a human chord in the mythical beautiful lady.

"Oh, so she were a *naughty* booful lady, daddy? Then she won't have jam for tea next Sunday, will she, daddy dear?"

The wooden door that led into the yard creaked open again, and again the red light from the setting sun flooded the little room.

"Yes, Sonny, of course, she was a naughty beautiful lady, that 's just what she was! But do you know I've come back to say that I won't be naughty any more just yet, at least if daddy lets me, and I'm going to be kind to him — at least, if daddy wants me. Daddy, do say something. May I be good for a change, and will you let me be kind to you? I've come to say I am sorry, like a good little girl; and — I may have jam for tea next Sunday, may n't I? Oh, daddy, do say something, and don't look so doleful! Don't you understand? I was wrong, and you were right, and — oh, how stupid it all is! Why — daddy — I — I don't believe you want me now!"

And Lady Joan flung herself into the old high-backed wooden settle, and crossed her feet, and broke into her maddening, mocking laugh as if to hide something she was ashamed of showing. But the musician, who knew her better than she thought he did, in spite of his almost

childish ignorance of woman's nature, went up to her and put the child on her lap, and smiled down into her upturned, laughing face.

"We both want our beautiful lady, don't we, Sonny? And may I make my confession too, Lady Joan? I was not sure that I did want you so desperately after you sent me away just now. But I found that I did directly you opened the door and the sunshine came in, and I can never do without you again. But it is better to understand one another at starting, is n't it?"

"Much better. And ideals are such bosh when we have grown out of our short frocks. So the understanding is quite complete; you don't know how much you love me, so we will call it desperately, and I don't know how much I love you, so we will call it desperately too. You have been in love shoals of times before, and I — well, I am capable of falling in love with some one else on my wedding-day. So neither of us will be disappointed if

it does not answer, but we have agreed to try. Hey-day, what fun it is! The lonely lady at the Court marrying the musician at the inn; the lady has the establishment, and the musician has the money to keep it up: if you were truly modern you would have both, and be a risen cabinet-maker. Relton will have enough to talk about for a year. But you will not behave as if we were engaged, *just* yet, will you? I — I don't feel as if I could quite stand it; do you understand?"

He had never heard her voice falter like that before, and he nodded to show that he quite understood. But she sprang to her feet with one of her quick gestures before he had time to realize the intoxicating feeling of that moment, and he experienced a sensation of chill.

"What wickedness to keep this child up so late; come along, Sonny lad, I told Nanny that I would put you to bed for a treat, and daddy is going to stay here and smoke his pipe."

And she vanished up the primitive staircase which led straight from the parlor up to the room above; and daddy was left somewhat with the feeling of having consented to Lady Joan's suggestion of marriage without receiving the right to kiss her, and he sat by the window again and looked among the fruit-trees, and called himself the happiest man in the world, and felt that he would be able to write his Swinburne song when the house was quiet.

A third time the wooden door creaked, and a third time the red sunlight filled the room. But the musician did not notice it, for he was still looking out of the window into the orchard, and he was telling himself with a sense of profound relief that his engagement was at last going right.

There was the sound of a low, soft, glad cry in the little inn parlor, and something glided in noiselessly, hesitated for a moment, and then sped across the ray of light to where he sat by the window. And the

musician turned his eyes away from the fruit-trees then, and fixed them on the apparition before him, and a look of dumb amazement began to creep slowly over his face.

"Digby, I've come at last. You said you would not mind waiting ten years for me, and it has only been one; yet, oh! such a weary long one to me, Digby! But it has not been my fault, it has n't really, dear; they never told me, and papa stopped your two first letters, and Roger Brill — it was Roger, was n't it? — never brought me the last one at all. It was all a mistake, I can't tell you now, but I found it out and gave them the slip, and came straight here. Oh, Digby, you are not angry with me, are you? I never meant to keep you waiting so, but I did not find it all out till yesterday, so I could not come before. Oh, it has been so sad, waiting for you. And I have been so ill too, Digby; they did not know what was the matter with me, but *I* knew all the time. It is all over now, though,

and we are going to be happy at last, are n't we? And may I have my kiss now, the one you promised me? I think if you had kissed me before I went away I should never have been ill. But I am going to be happy now, so happy. Oh, Digby, I feel so greedy over my happiness that I am frightened of its slipping away again. Is it because I have startled you that you are so silent? Tell me you are not angry with me, Digby, — and — when may I have my kiss, please?"

He took her mechanically into his arms and kissed the mouth that was held up to him, and he experienced dully the sort of shock that an unconventional man feels when a woman he has always considered the type of purity does something which a woman of the world would know better than to risk her reputation by doing. Upstairs, in the room overhead, he could hear Lady Joan singing his child to sleep. He passed his hand across his brow and wondered in a vague sort of way how it was

all going to end ; it seemed years since Lady Joan had spoken to him.

"No, Norah child, of course I am not angry with you; how could any one be that? But — "

"I don't mind anything if you are not angry with me. Only, why are you so quiet? Have you been suffering too, Digby ; have n't they been kind to you? "

"Who? the fates? No, I fancy they have not been kind to me. Did you come alone, childie? "

"I came with old nurse ; she is at the station. Digby, tell me, have you been ill? "

"No, I have not been ill ; I have been working rather hard, and perhaps worrying as well. Forgive me, dear ; you must own it is all rather startling? "

She put her arms round him, and laughed her low, soft laugh ; and he writhed at the contrast it made to Lady Joan's loud mocking one, which still rang in his ears.

"Of course it is ; I feel as if I had begun

to live all over again after being asleep in a cold, dark place ever since last year. Have you ever felt like that, Digby? Oh, I have never asked after Sonny; how is he? Has he gone to bed? May I go up and kiss him?"

"No, stay here," he said vehemently, and then bit his moustache savagely when she opened her great eyes at him; and he added in a quieter tone, "he is quite bonny, but we — we won't disturb him yet. There is a lady with him who — who has been kind to me, and — and she will be coming down perhaps —"

"A lady? Oh, I see," wonderingly. "I am glad she has been kind to you — very. Do you like her?"

Should he tell her then? It was not yet absolutely necessary.

"Yes, I like her," he said in a toneless voice, and he forced himself to smile reassuringly at her.

"I should like to see her, then. Hark, she is coming downstairs; how merry she

is, your friend!" as the full healthy laugh came down the stairs.

If there had been any means, however desperate, of putting off the crisis for another ten seconds, the musician would have stooped to it. But he realized that there was none, and with the same flash of consciousness as he realized it he braced himself to meet the event as manfully as such a pitiful situation would allow.

"Norah," he said sternly, putting her off his knee and standing up in front of her, "I have something to say to you. Will you be brave and hear me? It may all come right, of course, but — this lady was kind to my boy — and to me, when no one else would hold out a hand to us; and I thought you had forgotten me, and so — I asked her to marry me. It was only this afternoon, and of course —"

The noisy peals of laughter came right into the room through the inner door, and Lady Joan stood in the dull glow which was all that remained of the sunlight.

"Oh, daddy, what do you think Sonny said? Why — who — what is it?"

Something white, and quivering, and small, had fallen with a thud across her feet, and again the low, long child's cry with the joy gone out of it sounded in the stillness of the summer evening.

The musician had sunk on a chair with his face in his hands.

CHAPTER VI.

"My engagements never do seem to go right," sighed the musician.

He was sitting in the little bedroom upstairs by the side of his sleeping son, with his thumb tightly clasped in a fat brown hand. But he was not thinking of Sonny, although the clasp of the tiny fingers was comforting, as betokening some one who still believed in him.

"There is a curse upon my love affairs," said the musician. "Why should those letters never reach her? And why did she choose that moment of all others to come back? Another man might do a dirty trick and not be found out. God knows I never wanted to harm a woman in my life, least of all those two; and yet I've blundered in and got engaged to both of them

at once; and I've broken the heart of the purest and most innocent child — merciful heavens, what have n't I done? And here I am, left up here like a great fool, while they are tearing my character to ribbons downstairs. Was there ever such an unfortunate brute as myself?"

The musician's voice became husky, whether from self-pity, or from the recollection of the poor little scared face of the child who had found her happiness only to lose it again, it would be impossible to say.

"Women are such deuced odd things," continued the musician, complainingly; "they expect you to look on while they scratch one another's eyes out, and then if you touch a hair of their heads you have the whole lot of them against you. Bless her! I would give my life to undo what I have done to her to-day."

Which did he mean? Perhaps he hardly knew. But Lady Joan did all the while that she sat by Norah Bisley on the horse-hair sofa, downstairs in the oak-panelled parlor.

The child stirred in his sleep.

"Happy Sonny," murmured the musician, sentimentally, "your turn has yet to come. Why can't children always remain children? Norah ought never to have grown up; she was meant for eternal childhood. It was a mistake to make Lady Joan a child at all, she ought to have been born a full-grown woman. *I* ought never to have been born at all, of course. Who arranges these things?"

Then he went to the table by the window, and cleared it of Sonny's monkey without a tail, and the fat pink pin-cushion, and the pale green glass pot with a lid, and the shining porcelain shepherdess with a chipped crook, and the knitted toilet-cover that entrapped the legs of all these ornaments, and sat down to write the best song he had ever composed, to some words by George Meredith.

"Men are always brutes," said Lady Joan, "but this one has only become so by accident. Stupid people do more harm

than bad ones, ever so much. The fates will help you out of a hole if you have been a clever sinner, but they will lay a pitfall for you if you are a blundering, good-intentioned sort of creature. The fact is, this world of ours was made for clever people, and the fools haven't a chance. That is why he has gone wrong."

"Is he a fool then?" asked the weary voice on the sofa. One disillusionment more than another did not matter now that her idol was broken.

"He lives by his emotions, and he has no sense of proportion. It comes to the same thing. He had no intention of being faithless to you, and if you had not gone away he would have married you, and remained dull and virtuous to the end of his days. But you did go away, and I came home; and he can't live without a woman, and so he persuaded himself that his friendship for me was love. That was how it was done. Perhaps I encouraged him too. He was interesting to me, and

he was never in love with me, so I amused myself by trying to fascinate him. I can't help being a woman."

"Are women like that too?" thought the other, and she added out loud, "I am a woman too, but — " and left her sentence unfinished.

"No, you are not a woman, you are only a child," said Lady Joan; "the world is a place for you to play in. You were born to be happy, and you will never have to realize the things I have been telling you."

"I shall never be happy again," said the tired voice, with a sob.

"We all say that at eighteen; it comforts us sometimes to be the most miserable person in the world. Then we turn round a bit, and the sun comes out again, and some one gives us a tonic, and we endow a cot at the hospital, or give a farthing meal to five hundred brats in the East End, and then we go on again. You have never been in love before, of course?"

"Don't," moaned the other from the corner of the unsympathetic sofa.

The clear calm tones of her Mentor softened a little.

"I don't want to hurt you, Norah; I only mean that if you go in for loving once in a lifetime and that sort of thing, you really cannot properly understand the utter insouciance of an emotional man like Digby. He will love you more than ever now that you have come back, and you will be ten times happier than if you had been married straight off without any drawbacks. You have got rid of your ideals, to begin with, which most of them do not accomplish until after marriage, and that is always a risk. And you will find there is lots of time to be happy."

"Oh," said the other, in an altered tone, sitting upright, and speaking with startling emphasis, "and do you really mean to say that you think I should marry him *now?*"

Lady Joan did not turn a hair, vulgarly speaking; she felt she had done wonders

already by getting rid of the battered, hopeless little voice, and she merely smiled to herself in the twilight in a triumphant, self-satisfied manner.

"You are to come home with me now, and I will send down for your maid, and you shall stay the night and get rested. I suppose you have eaten nothing for hours? Then how can you expect to take a proper view of things? Half the troubles of life come from a bad digestion; it's not romantic, but then I don't belong to your musical set."

And she carried Norah off through the back door, leaving Mrs. Haxtell with material for a year's gossip, and a note for the musician to the effect that he was to come up to the Court after dinner and give them some music.

"That is the cleverest woman I know," he sputtered, as he plunged his head into a basin of cold water after reading the scrawled scrap of paper. And he added grimly, "I suppose she will tell me which

one I am to marry. And I am not in a position to object."

But he felt grateful to her for asking him in such a commonplace sort of way, and he put the song he had been writing into the pocket of his Inverness coat, and walked up to the Court in the dusk.

She was just as commonplace in her greeting. He found them in the big drawing-room near the open window, and he had to walk the whole length of the room before they took any notice of the butler's announcement, or turned round. Lady Joan was knitting a large white shawl, and talking vigorously; Norah was lying silently on a couch, with her great sentimental eyes looking out into the garden; and the curate, who had also dropped in after dinner, was sipping his coffee and listening deferentially to his hostess.

"Of course, indifference is the characteristic of the times, as you say, Mr. Johnson, but I am not sure that it matters much. There is not much to choose be-

tween the negative virtue of the present day and the positive wickedness of our forefathers."

Mr. Johnson ventured the unavoidable reply that negative virtue was worse than positive wickedness, because it professed more.

"That is true, but we must continue to be miserable sinners in some way or other, or else the Litany would have to be expunged, and that would offend the Conservatives," said Lady Joan, with a flippancy which was merely to hide the fact that she was feeling what women call overwrought; and she turned to Digby to conceal her consciousness of having been extravagant instead of witty. "Ah, Mr. Raleigh, how do you do? How good of you to come on such a short notice. You have seen Norah to-day, I think? Our new curate, Mr. Johnson. We were just longing for some music."

Digby was again thankful for her *sang froid*. He touched her fingers, and bowed

to the others, and he took his black coffee from the tray presented to him by the butler, and apologized in the most ordinary manner for not being in evening dress.

"And may we have some music, please? Mr. Raleigh is a musician, you know, Mr. Johnson; perhaps you know his songs, though?"

Mr. Johnson said he was passionately fond of music, and he knew Mr. Raleigh's name quite well, and had once sung a song of his called "Love's Sweet Illusions."

"I have not written a song of that name; I never write ballads," said the musician, crushingly, as he opened the piano.

"Something stormy, please," said Lady Joan, carelessly; "it is so hot that if you played anything sentimental I think it might affect even my unmusical nerves."

"Something of your own," said Norah. They were the first words she had spoken, and the musician glanced nervously in her direction.

He sat down and played the song he had just written, and hummed the words to show how it went. They were taken from the "Shaving of Shagpat," and the music was full of the reckless passion and meaning of the original.

"Whether we die or we live,
Matters it now no more;
Life hath naught further to give;
Love is its crown and its core;
Come to us either, we 're rife, —
Death or life!

"Death can take not away,
Darkness and light are the same;
We are beyond the pale ray,
Wrapt in a rosier flame;
Welcome which will to our breath, —
Life or death!"

When he began to play, all the stormy and conflicting feelings of the last few hours passed through his mind, and he was seized with the grimness and humor of the situation in which he found himself, and he played better than either of the two women, who were so strangely woven into his life, had ever heard him play before. When he

reached the second verse he stopped humming the words, though none of them noticed it; and when he came to the end no one spoke for some seconds.

The musician was thinking that he knew now which one he wanted to marry, and that it did not matter if his love affairs went wrong so long as there was music to be made.

Lady Joan went on with her shawl, and reflected that if she lived to be a hundred she should never understand musical people or their ways.

Norah lay with her brown eyes full of tears, and she was thinking that love was the strongest thing in the world, for it could outlive its ideals.

The curate was not thinking at all, and he got up and put down his cup with a clatter.

"Very sweet and pretty," he said; "it quite reminds me of a little Italian thing I once heard on a military band at Leamington. Have you ever taken the waters at Leamington, Mr. Raleigh?"

"Play something else," said Lady Joan, abruptly, for the spell was working well, she thought, and she smiled triumphantly again at the tears in Norah's eyes.

This time Lady Joan walked to the window and stepped out on the terrace.

"Have you seen the lake in moonlight, Mr. Johnson?" she called out when the music stopped; and the curate followed her into the garden.

The musician crossed over to the couch by the other window, and sat down on a chair close to it.

"Norah," he said in a low tone, "do you know when I wrote the last thing I played?"

She said nothing, and her fingers trembled.

"I wrote it when you went away, last time, with your father. It was full of tears for you."

She still kept her face turned from him, and she spoke almost in a whisper.

"And the other? The song?"

"Guess," he said, also in a whisper.

She swept her tearful eyes round upon him searchingly, hungrily.

"Was it this evening — after — ?"

He bowed his head gravely. Her hands went out to him impetuously.

"Oh, Digby, did it make you feel all that?"

.

"There is no doubt," said Lady Joan, loudly, "that our sympathies or our antipathies make us sometimes imagine a likeness where it cannot exist. I remember when I was a small child and came to stay with my great-uncle here, I used to invent every kind of excuse for going down to the post-office, because I thought the boy behind the counter was like a cousin of mine I had a romantic admiration for at the time. And of course you know how there are some days when everybody in the street reminds you of some one you don't want to meet, and others when you feel you have not the least affinity to your own sister. The fact is, family likeness is all rubbish,

like most of the traditions we have grown up with; I mean, there is just as much chance of two strangers being alike, which you have just proved yourself, Mr. Johnson, by supposing Mr. Raleigh and my little friend Norah to be brother and sister. Shall we go in, now, or would you like another turn round the garden?"

The curate felt he had been sufficiently battered in that one brief stroll to the lake, and he consulted his watch and said he had some work waiting for him at home. So they came back again through the open window, and found Norah still lying on the couch, and the musician on the low chair at her side.

"What a horrid little man," said Lady Joan, when the curate had left.

"Is he?" said Norah, vaguely.

"Oh, I don't think he's bad," said the musician, cheerfully.

Their hostess made a huge effort, and preserved her smile.

"It may be because I had to entertain

him," she said, knitting busily at her large white shawl.

"Why did n't you leave him alone?" they asked, with the sublime innocence of the selfish.

"Because that was what you did," she replied.

"Oh, but we thought you were getting on so well with him," said Norah.

"Besides," added Digby, "you need not have asked him into the garden."

"Perhaps I need n't," said Lady Joan, and counted her stitches.

"I am so dreadfully worried about something," she said, presently.

"What about?" they asked, feeling that it had somehow been the atmosphere of the whole day.

"The dilapidation of my pig-styes; Jones says two of them will go on for some time, but the others want repairing. Now, is it worth while to have two repaired, or shall I wait until they all fall to pieces, and put up brick ones?"

"That is a question," said Norah, gravely.

The musician laughed heartily.

"What a fuss ladies make about trifles. If you had a man to manage your affairs — "

"But I have n't," she said quickly, and looked him full in the face; "I thought of getting one, but — it has fallen through."

The musician did not laugh any more, and Norah's big eyes began to shine again. Lady Joan felt she had fully deserved that little bit of revenge. But it was not amusing enough to carry any further, and she was beginning to weary of the protracted love-making of the day, especially now that she was no longer a principal actor in the play. So she folded up her work elaborately, and pinned it in a white silk handkerchief, and put her hand on her mouth to conceal a yawn.

"It has been the longest day I have ever spent. I suppose it is the weather. Would you shut the piano, Mr. Raleigh? You look tired to death, Norah, and I am going to take you to bed. Come along at once, please."

They all rose to their feet, and there was an embarrassing moment. But Lady Joan took another little bit of revenge here, and kept her arm round Norah's waist, and her sharp eyes on both of them.

"You will come to breakfast to-morrow, and bring Sonny with you? Say good-night and come, Norah, I am so sleepy."

So they all shook hands frigidly, and the musician asked what time breakfast was; and they left him alone in the long drawing-room, and went upstairs. Lady Joan still found him there when she came down again, half-an-hour later; he was at the piano, but he got up as she came in.

"You are the finest woman I ever met," he said with emotion.

She made a gesture of impatience.

"Don't cover me with virtues I don't possess; I can't stand it," she said sharply; she had a very unmusical voice, he thought. "Don't you know that my god is expediency? It is the only one that is any good for this world. I don't want you to

marry Norah, or I should not have come back to the inn to ask you to marry me. Do you suppose my pride suffered nothing by that? However, you are going to marry her because it is absolutely the only way out of it, and I have been obliged to give in to you both. But for Heaven's sake don't imagine I am doing it from unselfishness, or any of that bosh, because I 'm not."

"Then you have not forgiven me?" he asked humbly.

"I shall never forgive you," said Lady Joan, decidedly; "is it not an insult that you should suppose me capable of forgiveness?"

"Perhaps it is," said the musician, thoughtfully. "Why was I born so accursedly unlucky?"

"I 'm afraid I can't tell you. But you seem to be going to have all you want now, so it is about time you ceased railing at your fate. I suppose if I were properly unselfish I should efface myself at once, and part from you in an affecting scene. But the people who make affecting scenes

are apt to forget that they have got to meet again afterwards as ordinary actors in an ordinary play, and then the memory of the affecting scene makes them sheepish; so I prefer to tell you that I am merely and vulgarly angry with you for inviting me to make a fool of myself. Not that I envy that poor child upstairs either; she does n't understand you a bit, and you will wound her half-a-dozen times a day. It is not my affair, however, and you will have to get through it together somehow; I wash my hands of you both."

The musician said he thought they might manage it, perhaps; and Lady Joan pulled down the blind in eloquent silence, and rang the bell. He took the hint and held out his hand.

"Good-night. You will come to breakfast?"

"Since you say so; I always do what you tell me," he said, with truth.

"No, you don't," she contradicted, "or you would never have cajoled me into say-

ing I would marry you. If you had done what I told you to-day all this trouble would not have arisen. How brutally forgetful men are!"

Which was hardly fair of her, he thought, as it was his distinct recollection that she had really ended in asking him to marry her, and had hardly waited for his assent to the proposal; if she had meant what she said in the castle meadow, and kept to it, there would have been no complications at all. And the musician finished his cigar in the orchard of the "Relton Arms," and came to the conclusion that Lady Joan with all her excellent qualities had an unpleasant amount of worldly wisdom and egoism in her composition, which he had never discovered until he had seen it contrasted with the womanly innocence of his dear little betrothed.

"How brutally forgetful men are!" were the words that remained on the lips of the worldly wise woman all through that hot night in August.

CHAPTER VII.

THERE were many and various opinions concerning the fresh engagement of the musician. His lady friends could at first hardly believe that he should overlook them all, and choose a wife who was not one of themselves, and had never attended the receptions in the West End studio; but when they learnt that it was not only a fact, but that the date of the marriage was fixed, they at once did their best to meet the situation gracefully by buying the most appropriate wedding presents they could find, in the shape of biscuit boxes shaped like drums, and clocks mounted in lyres. This caused considerable rivalry among his pupils, which was not lessened by their desire to meet his betrothed, and their jealousy when this benefit was vouchsafed to

one or another of them; they wondered among themselves whether they would be asked to call, and they allowed the musician to talk about her with a generosity which was three parts diplomacy.

Mrs. Reginald Routh presumed upon her intimacy with the musician so far as to invite Norah to stay with her.

"It has been the wish of my heart to see dear Mr. Digby married," was what she told every one, with her frank smile; "indeed, I have been trying to get him a wife for some years now, only it was so impossible to find one good enough. I have no doubt that Miss Bisley is all that could be desired, and one must leave *something* to a higher power sometimes; but I cannot help taking a little to my own credit as well, and I am convinced that Mr. Digby would never have thought of looking out for a wife at all if it had not been for my persuasions; he was far too fond of Ibsen and Schopenhauer and Bernard Shaw, and all those tiresome people. At all events, I

never allowed a week to pass without asking him to dinner, and the picture of my domestic happiness must have done something for him. Ah, well, my work is done now; and thank God my ideal of friendship is too high to stand in the way of his marrying, though I have felt towards him like a sister, and it is hard at first to give up my place to another. But at least I know how to be generous, and she shall come and stay with me at once, so that there may be one friend in London for her when she is married. She will *have* to let me call then! And I shall be able to give her a hint or two about her future husband; I'm sure no one could know him better than I do. No doubt she is one of those artful little dolls who will annoy him until every nerve of his musical soul is on end, and he has to give up composing; and what will posterity do then?"

Mr. Reginald Routh, who never did anything but sign blank checks when he was told, was sent about town to buy the most

expensive dessert service he could find; and when he brought back specimens to his invalid wife of choice plates with floral designs, he was sent out again to hunt for more suitable patterns, until the search ended, as his wife had intended it should, in a whole set being ordered from Paris, costing a guinea a plate, and decorated with a dainty design of pink cupids playing trumpets and harps in impossible positions.

The Raleighs, as a family, were glad. Owing to Norah's intervention the subject of Digby's first marriage was allowed to be mentioned, and a new toy was brought to the old manor in the shape of his four-year old son; and as the Squire was not asked to support the child, and as he learned furthermore that Digby's new wife would bring him money, he raised no objection to his marrying again, and allowed himself meanwhile to be completely enslaved by the tyrannical Sonny. The musician's sisters regarded Norah with the feelings of most sisters, excepting the most callous;

that is, they wrote affectionately to her, with smiles on their lips and murder at their hearts, and they received affectionate letters in reply, which they declared they could "see through;" they were angry with every one who did not approve of the match, and they told one another gloomily that she was sure to be "designing;" they drew out long descriptions of his intended bride from the musician, and they only smiled when he told them that they would not like her at first, because she was so very different from all their friends. Lady Raleigh, who had always expected her eldest son to marry an opera singer or an actress, openly showed her relief at his engagement to an ordinary gentleman's daughter, who did not play or sing and had no particular talent for anything, who had never wished to be independent and to leave her home, and who went to church on Sunday morning with as much sense of duty and enjoyment as she bestowed on her breakfast.

And when Norah came to stay at Murville Manor, the impression she made was so pleasing that even the suspicious Digby had to acknowledge his engagement was at last going right. The Squire liked her because she never complained when he took her over the biggest duckery in the village, and because she read the whole of his pamphlet called "How to make £50 a year out of ducks," without disagreeing with it. Lady Raleigh liked her because she had always said she would; besides, Norah agreed that England was the only place for Jack. The boys said she "was n't bad, but wanted backing up at times," which was a kindly criticism considering their bitter disappointment at not having Lady Joan for their sister-in-law. The girls fell in love with her because they could not help it; and their old nurse grudgingly allowed that she "could n't have been nicer brought up, not if she had been your mamma's own child." There was something exemplary about Nora which

always made her do the thing that was expected of her at the right moment. She never had a headache when the boys wanted her to romp with them, she did not hurt the children's feelings by speaking French before them, she always wanted music when Helen was going to sing, and she did not obtrude her affection for the family hero in public. Perhaps this last evidence of good breeding had more weight with the Raleighs than anything else she did.

Shortly before the marriage there was a monster reception in the studio in the West End. All the lady pupils lined the walls, and examined critically the names on the wedding presents, and wondered enviously where Norah bought her hats, and manœuvred anxiously for a few words with the musician. Mrs. Reginald Routh, in consideration of her being an invalid, sat in the most comfortable chair in the room, while Lady Raleigh, on the edge of an extremely straight-backed one, had to listen to her

eulogies of Mr. Digby's music and Mr. Digby himself. The bride-elect as usual played her part excellently; she made her way through the toast-racks, and the plated spoons in pale-blue cases, and the pepper-pots, and the clocks with the musical devices, which were spread out on little tables all over the room; and she said a few gracious words to each lady pupil, in which she thanked her for her particular toast-rack or case of spoons, and hoped she would call after the marriage on the musician and herself in their flat in Victoria Street. And she ended her circuit of the room, as was, inevitable, beside the throne of Mrs. Reginald Routh, where she relieved Lady Raleigh for a time, and whence she was, from a quick survey of the attitude of every one present, that there was little chance of being relieved herself at all.

"This is the happiest moment of my life," murmured Mrs. Reginald, with a tremor in her voice; "you will excuse my foolish tears, will you not? He has been

like a dear brother, an elder brother, to me ever since I have known him, and it is natural that I should have the jealous feeling of a sister in seeing him belong to another. It is only at first, of course — dear me! what a terrible tyrant deep affection is, to be sure! Don't mind me dear, I shall be better directly;" and she applied a lace handkerchief to a perfectly dry eye, and followed the passage of the musician among the wedding presents with the other.

"Why, there is that forward person who used to throw herself at Mr. Digby's head last season," she continued, recovering with rapidity, "Lady something or another, — came into the title by a fluke, I believe. Who is the handsome fellow she is flirting with now, eh? So that 's Jack Raleigh, is it? Oh! I've heard about him. Not at all like his brother, is he?"

"He 's very nice," said Norah, gently.

"Nice, is he? Then he does n't know what he 's got hold of in that young woman.

I suppose she thinks as she can't get one, she 'll have the other. Have you been introduced to her, my dear?"

"Yes — I have. That is, I — I stayed with her — for a night."

"I 'm not surprised at that. She wants to know you after your marriage, my dear. That is where you will feel your inexperience, when these designing clever women come and play upon your ignorance in order to get at your husband. You will feel the want of some nice sensible married woman, not too old, who has been through it all, and can help you to see through them. I 've no patience with these women who won't have husbands of their own, but must needs go running after other people's. Ah-h, Mr. Digby, is it *really* true that we are to hear the last movement of the trio this afternoon? How quite *too* lovely!"

The musician cleverly introduced his father to her at this point, and hastened off to the piano; and Sir Marcus, who had not been enjoying himself at all in a circle

whose interests were not his own, settled himself down to a denunciation of town life, which necessarily led him on to the allotment question; and Mrs. Reginald Routh for the first time in her life found she had met her match.

"You 're feeling played out, are n't you?" Jack Raleigh was saying to his companion while the instruments were being tuned.

"Oh, no, only bored to death. I wonder which is the worst, to be married or musical? But both at once — poor Mr. Raleigh!"

Jack broke into a laugh, which was hardly warranted by the smallness of the joke; and as the first chord was struck on the piano simultaneously, Lady Joan's reputation was not improved among the disturbed audience by the circumstance. At any other time she would have enjoyed the shocked glances that were thrown in her direction; but this afternoon she was feeling too cross to be perverse, and she hardly

waited for the end of the trio to take leave of the smiling host.

"So you're off already? I knew you were played out," said Jack, whose vocabulary, like his perception, was limited; "shall I let fly for a hansom?"

"Oh, no; didn't I tell you before that I had the carriage?" answered Lady Joan, impatiently, though she realized the futility of censuring an offender who was always blind to his offence. "And I can see myself out, thank you."

"But — you will let me come with you? It's beastly foggy out, and something might easily happen, don't you know. You said you had n't brought the man along, and I 'd sooner see you through, 'pon my honor I would. I won't bother, I won't really, don't you know, and you can fire me at the next block if I 'm in the way. That 's straight, is n't it?"

In spite of the American drawl, there was something familiar in the pleading tones of his voice that reminded her un-

pleasantly of an incident she had been trying to forget, and she would have curtly refused his offer had she not found the pale eyes of Mrs. Reginald Routh fixed inquiringly upon her.

"If you like, I shall be delighted," she said, with a sudden show of graciousness that both pleased and surprised him; "you will see if the brougham is there? Goodbye, Mrs. Routh; so glad to see you looking so well. I suppose I can't give you a lift? Auf Wiedersehen, Norah; shall expect you both to lunch to-morrow; don't forget. What detestable weather it is; I shall go and vegetate at Relton if this fog goes on. Is it there, Mr. Jack? Oh, thanks very much."

In the brougham, she leaned back and closed her eyes, and wished the fog did not make them smart, and that she had managed to evade her companion after all, in spite of the exquisite annoyance he had enabled her to inflict on Mrs. Reginald. But Jack guessed nothing of her thoughts,

and plodded on with his own instead, which all related to her and to a certain desire that filled his mind at that moment; he could only think about one thing at a time.

"I say, you — you did n't rightly mean what you said just now, did you?" he began slowly, as they stopped in the Circus in a dead block of omnibuses and traffic.

"What did I say? I 've forgotten long ago. You promised not to bother," returned Lady Joan, shortly, which was not encouraging.

But Jack was not easily snubbed.

"You said that marriage was tommy rot, don't you know," he pursued steadily.

She opened her eyes wide and stared at him.

"I did n't say so. But it is. Why?"

"Oh, well, you know, because I don't think it is exactly. At least I mean I don't see why it should be, don't you know."

"Then perhaps it is n't. It does n't matter, does it? Oh, why don't we go on?"

"I say, how jolly smart you are to-day," he said crossly, and dropped the drawl.

"Why? Because I don't wish to discuss the marriage question? I am so sick of it. If that is all you want, go and read Björnson and all the others. Modern fiction is crammed with it, so is the modern drama. Your brother can lend you crowds of books about the marriage question — he won't want them for a year or two." She ended with a little hard laugh.

"You know I don't care a hang for the marriage question," he said sulkily.

"No more do I," she said cheerfully, "so we'll let it drop. I am so glad you are not modern. Do you know, the first night I saw you — "

"Yes?" he said eagerly, as she stopped. It is a sure sign of comradeship when two people begin comparing notes about their first meeting.

"Oh," she continued carelessly, "I only felt relieved that you had no views and no ideas, and did n't want a revolution like

your brother, and never fell in love with people. It made you so nice to flirt with, that was all. Thank Heaven, we are going on again at last."

Jack only hated the policeman for letting them pass; the fog was lifting in Oxford Street, and they were rolling along quickly in the direction of Pont Street; there was no time to be lost.

"Do listen seriously for once," he suggested; "why should n't marriage between two fellows — "

"I thought we had agreed to let it drop," she interrupted impatiently.

"But it is n't the marriage question. It — it 's marriage itself," he cried desperately, and then held his breath.

They had turned down Park Lane into the yellow darkness again, and the two in the brougham could not even see each other's features. Outside, the policemen were shouting directions; within the carriage, Lady Joan was leaning back far in her corner, and thinking swiftly. Was this

to be the solution of all that had been puzzling her this afternoon? It was not often that Lady Joan was depressed; but when she was, a yellow fog was not more gloomy than her mood.

"Don't you see how I've loved you all the time? It's not my form to gas like Digby, and I suppose I'm a bally idiot, because the guvnor always says I am, and of course I haven't any oof; so it's all confounded cheek on my part, it is really, don't you know. But — you said you hated to be married, so why shouldn't we be engaged, just enough to stop people from talking, don't you know, so that we could belong, sort of; do you twig? I'd give you my word of honor to go back to the States, and work like a nigger till — till you sent for me again. That wouldn't bother you, and it might be rather jolly, don't you know. And that's all there is to it."

She was still silent. If he had known that she was comparing his proposal with the one she had had in the summer, and

calculating how much happiness and comfort she was likely to get out of his romantic attachment to her, his ideal of her might have received a shock. But for the sake of ideals some thoughts are allowed to go unread; and he only noticed that she moved a little out of her corner, and he at once drew nearer to her.

"I do love you, dear," he said tremulously, and ventured to lay his broad palm on hers; "don't you think — we might — "

One of the blind impulses came to him which were his making and his ruin. Lady Joan would have loathed him at that moment if he had done anything commonplace, or waited for her to take the initiative. But he put his arm round her waist so softly that she scarcely felt it.

"May I kiss you?" he whispered.

CHAPTER VIII.

Two years later, the musician and his wife went down to Relton for their Easter holiday. They stayed at the "Relton Arms," although they had a warm invitation to the Court instead; but Digby was unusually firm in his determination not to be the guest of Lady Joan, and Norah's objections that there was no nursery for the baby, and that people would "wonder," were for once overruled. She satisfied her sense of the fitness of things by telling Mrs. Reginald Routh and her set that there were early romantic associations in connection with the little old country inn which induced her and her husband to go there again; and to people who spent their lives in straining after unconventional effects with a conventional reason for them in the back-

ground in case it was wanted, the explanation was quite sufficient. But the fact remained that the "Relton Arms" offered insufficient accommodation for a baby and a growing boy and a nurse, and there were jars in that holiday in consequence.

"This is what I like," exclaimed the musician, enthusiastically, at breakfast, the morning after their arrival: "fresh eggs and milk straight from the cow — the — the animal I mean, none of your cooked-up stuff such as we 've been eating in Victoria Street. I can't think why you don't have it straight up from here, Norah, instead of —"

"Because you said the eggs at the Stores were just as good, dear, and they are cheaper; don't you remember?" said his wife, gently. Digby wished, not for the first time, that her memory were less reliable.

"Well, at any rate, the milk is a different thing; just look at the cream on it. Baby ought to thrive on stuff like that, ought n't she?"

"That is just what I am anxious about; it has only upset her so far. Hark! is that baby crying? Precious thing! Do you mind managing Sonny's egg and pouring out the coffee, Digby, while I run upstairs?"

"I am inclined to agree with Plato," began the musician, earnestly; but his wife was gone, and Sonny was clamoring for food. He took up an egg, and then almost dropped it again as the wooden door was pushed open from without, with the same creak as of yore.

"Auntie Joan, Auntie Joan," shrieked Sonny, tumbling off his high-chair with a clatter, and dragging the tablecloth with a medley of spoons and knives after him. The musician was thankful for the diversion at that moment, and forebore to swear as he set his son on his feet again, and held out his hand with a smile to Lady Joan. She was in her riding-habit, and he told himself that she looked like Diana, or any other goddess that represents the woman a man admires.

"Well?" she said, with her fresh, breezy laugh, "how soon will you be tired of picknicking and ready to come to terms? And where 's Norah?"

"Upstairs. There 's a draught under the bedroom door, and Mrs. Haxtell has quarrelled violently with nurse. Baby cries perpetually — teeth. And I can't get any breakfast. That 's all so far, I think;" and he laughed as heartily as she, and they bumped their heads together under the table in picking up the fallen utensils, and came up again with red faces just as Norah returned with the baby in her arms.

"Oh, is it you, Joan? So glad to see you, dear; sit down and have some breakfast. Why have n't you poured out the coffee, Digby? How helpless men are! Take baby a minute, will you? There, you have set her off again, just when I had quieted her. She has taken cold in the night, that 's what it is. Hush, hush! There then, it sha'n't, that it sha'n't!"

"After all," began the musician in a momentary lull, "I do think Plato —"

"Will you give Digby something to eat, Joan, dear?" interposed Norah gently; and peace presently pervaded the breakfast-table.

"The lambs *is* fat, is n't they, daddy?" asked Sonny, from the window-seat. "How does the lambs know, daddy, which sheep is their right mother?"

"Confound his precocity," grumbled the musician; "what is one to do with a son like that? Besides, I can't tell him myself; how *do* they know?"

"They don't," said Lady Joan, promptly; "it 's a fact I used to dispute with my governess in my youth. It is only we who take it upon ourselves to say that they do; we have no means of proving it. The sheep takes them as they come, and looks equally bored with them all."

Digby laughed loudly, and Norah murmured something in a pained voice about maternal instinct.

"All nonsense, my dear," persisted Lady

Joan, gayly; "no amount of maternal instinct could help a sheep to tell her own lamb from any other sheep's lamb. Besides, why should she want to? As it is, she can have a change without being called fickle. Happy sheep!"

Sonny was standing with his legs very wide apart and his blue eyes fixed on her face, as she said this.

"Auntie Joan 's pertending," he said solemnly. The others laughed, which awoke the slumbering baby again; and Norah, after complaining between its wails that the draught under the bedroom door was answerable for everything, carried it upstairs again by way of curing it.

"Well, what is it?" said the musician, in the peace that ensued on his wife's departure; and he lighted his cigarette and looked across at Lady Joan.

"How did you know there was anything?" she asked.

"I always know," he said, in a superior tone; "we have n't been chums all these

years for nothing. Tell me what's up, dear. Hasn't Jack been writing to you, the scamp?"

"Oh, yes. He always writes. He is quite good. *I* am the naughty one; I always have been, I think. I am not fit to be engaged; it is true what I told you — that day."

They were very fond of making allusions to *that day;* they told themselves it was one of the privileges of their friendship, now that *she* was safely engaged and *he* was securely married, to mention subjects which were not always even respectable; it did not occur to them that this constant renewal of back chapters in their lives had more to do with their egoism than their friendship.

"And what dreadful thing have you been doing now, please?" asked Digby.

She flung back her head and laughed mockingly, as she used to do.

"Do you remember telling me that marriage was the only way out of it? I am

half inclined to agree with you now, though I wrote to Jack yesterday to break off our engagement. That is all."

Sonny hummed his baby ditty on the window-seat, without interruption, for a few seconds.

Then the musician laid down his cigarette.

"You — did — that?" he said, drawing a long breath; "what a wonderful creature you are, Joan!"

"Only wonderful?" she said lightly; "are you sure you don't mean heartless?"

"Why did you do it? Do stop laughing," he urged her. Her eyes flashed angrily.

"What do you mean?" she cried; "do you think I *am* heartless?"

"Surely not," said the musician, looking along his cigarette, and avoiding her direct glance across the breakfast-table.

"Then why do you say I am?"

"I — I did n't say so, if you remember, Joan. The word entirely originated with —"

"Oh, I know," she interrupted impatiently; "but why don't you think so? You ought to — everybody does — Norah would."

"Norah is n't — Norah can't understand — that is, Norah does not know you so well as I do, and she is a little prejudiced sometimes — " stumbled the musician.

"Just so, yes," said Lady Joan, gravely, and there was a pause.

"Then you agree with me that I have done the best thing under the circumstances, the miserable circumstances?" she began again in a few moments.

"I always agree with you," said the musician; "but you must own that — not knowing the circumstances which — which led to your course of action, it — it becomes difficult — "

He yielded to a nervous desire to laugh instead of finishing his sentence; and Lady Joan, after a desperate effort to lose her temper, weakly followed his example.

"Tell me why you did it," he said more

naturally when they were grave again, and he walked round the table and leaned over the back of her chair. She fell into the rôle of the penitent child.

"I could n't help it, it came over me yesterday that I could n't stand it any longer. I 've always said perpetual engagements would not answer, because people could never stand the awful monotony of them. It is only the monotony of Jack's love for me that has exhausted my patience now. If he had really been at all wild after we were engaged, which every one was so fond of prophesying to me, I think I might have got to love him too much to give him up. But — oh! it is the badness in me I think, Digby. Why don't you scold me instead of looking at me like that?"

He stroked her hair idly without speaking, and she had to laugh again to hide the tremor in her lips.

"I always told you I wanted our engagement kept secret; it would have been much

better. It was an experiment, rather a disastrous one for Jack —"

"And for you?"

"— and it should never have been made public. Engagements never ought to be made public, and if they were what they claim to be they never would be. It is because they are such miserable, heartless arrangements that we have to take refuge in the approbation of society to make them a success at all; if it were not for the connivance of their friends I don't believe people would ever get to the marriage service at all. No wonder men say such hard things about women; we simply destroy all the sentiment that is in them by our eagerness to cash it at once, and then we go in for a cheap cynicism and call them heartless brutes. If I were a man I would never ask a woman to be my wife, never, never, never! At least, not if I were in love with her."

She spoke rapidly and vehemently, and the musician framed her face in his hands and coughed a little to steady his voice.

"Poor Jack!" he said almost inaudibly.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, in the same tone.

"Because he might have married you, and he has just missed it," he breathed in reply; and their heads drew closer together and remained so for a few seconds. They had had enough in their two lives to make them either sure friends or enemies. And morality is mainly a question of circumstance, and largely dependent on the chances of detection.

"Why are you so good to me?" she asked.

"Am I?" he said with a smile, and he removed one of his hands to brush off the ash of his cigarette. "I am only what you make me. I have always been in your hands, you know."

"Rubbish!" she said, and laughed unnaturally, and freed herself from his touch and walked away to the window. Norah's voice came from the orchard, calling him, and he went out through the door. Lady

Joan sat on the window ledge and thought over what he had been saying, and then about the words of her letter to Jack, and then that it was time to walk back to the Court and speak about the mending of a certain fence to the man. And finally she thought about nothing at all as she yielded to the drowsiness of the hot spring morning, and rested her cheek against a background of green creepers and became conscious of nothing but a confused medley of well-known sounds, — the loud ticking of the clock in the way trifles assert their importance after an event, the tuneless humming of the child on the floor, the warning bell of the postman's bicycle as he came round the corner of the street, and the splash of the ducks he frightened into the pond as he came. Then she raised her heavy eyelids, and saw the musician looking at her with a strange, frightened expression on his face.

"Yes?" she said quickly, with a tight feeling at her breast.

He had a telegram in his hand.

"Joan, dear, can you bear to hear something? I — I know I am a weak fool, but some one must tell you, and Norah won't, and I would sooner die than give you any pain, but — Joan — "

His agitation and her own anxiety almost made her hate him.

"Tell me what there is to tell," she cried fiercely, and snatched at the telegram, and then recoiled from it as it fluttered away on the floor.

"No, don't!" she said the instant after, "I think I know it. Jack — "

"Yes, dear. That is it. Jack will never — Jack will never have your letter," and the musician put out his hand to her. She did not take it, nor heed him.

"It was a railway accident — they have not cabled much," he faltered; but she did not help him by a word or a look, and they stood silent for an interminable minute.

Then she spoke through her dry lips with a little forced laugh.

"What a pity I did not wait for the next mail," she said; "what a character for constancy I might have had!"

He had just time to put out his arm to catch her as she fell suddenly forward.

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"It is extraodinary how quietly Joan has taken it," Norah said on the evening of the same day. "I often wonder if she does feel things as we do, or whether Mrs. Reginald Routh is not right about her after all. You know, she always did say that Joan's hatred of music meant a lack of heart; of course, that is putting it rather strongly, and I should n't call her heartless myself — because nobody is quite that; but still, she has been strangely cool about poor Jack, and she has not even mentioned the mourning. I should not be surprised if she did not wear black at all, she is so inclined to be eccentric. I am glad I wrote to Peter Robinson's in time for the post; I shall get the patterns tomorrow. I don't know when I have felt

so upset, though of course it does not do to talk about it. I wish there were a piano here; it would do us both so much good, wouldn't it, dear?"

Digby looked at his wife's gentle face as she bent it over her needlework, and he counted the regular folds of her soft gray gown and the coils of brown hair round her head, and he made a few mental reflections on the marvellous nature of woman.

"I cannot conceive what it must be to live without the love of music," she went on unconsciously in her low tuneful voice. "Music is like religion in that way, I think; we may try to do without it when we are happy, but we want it terribly when the trials come. Now, what *has* Joan to fall back upon to-night, do you suppose?"

"I don't know, but I will go and see," muttered the musician; he felt he had had as much as he could stand just then, and he took up his straw hat significantly. The old brown felt one had been gently but firmly suppressed soon after his marriage.

"What was that you said, Digby?"

"I will go and make her come down here to be cheered up. You are too tired to come, eh, childie?" said Digby; and he kissed her before he pushed open the creaking door and went out into the moonlight.

The butler said Lady Joan was busy in her boudoir and wished to be left undisturbed. But Digby managed to gain admittance a few minutes later, and he found occasion to add a few more reflections to his mental synopsis of woman.

"How nice of you to come, and what a cold creature you are! Come and sit near the fire; I waged a war with Mrs. Binks and had a wood fire lighted because I felt chilly, which shocked the conventional old thing very much indeed, because there never has been a fire lighted in here between spring-cleaning and Michaelmas, since the memory of man. But why should I listen to Mrs. Binks or any one else if I don't choose? At all events, it is nice and

cosey, and I am going to tell you all my ideas. But tell me first why you came. What are you laughing at?"

She looked up at him sharply from the hearthrug where she had flung herself down to stir the fire, and he stroked his moustache hurriedly.

"I am not laughing, Joan. I came to take you back to Norah — to be cheered up."

"Oh. It was very kind of you — both. How is the baby?" said she, turning a log dexterously over on its side and making the sparks fly up the chimney and send a red glow over her face.

"The baby is — ah — quiescent. Mrs. Haxtell is not. I think on the whole you had better not go there for amusement. My family affairs are only funny from the outside just at present. I think you had better give me your new ideas instead. What have you been thinking about all day?"

"That is what I am going to tell you."

She stood up and leaned against the mantelshelf, and looked over his head at the bookshelves on the wall. "First of all, I hated myself for a whole hour. I thought I had got outside myself and was looking at myself like — oh, like another woman would look at me, Norah for instance. And I did n't enjoy myself for that hour at all. I almost made up my mind to go abroad again; but it was lunch-time, and over the mayonnaise, which was particularly good to-day, I came to the conclusion that it was like running away, and everybody would say I had gone 'to get over it,' and I could not tolerate that for a moment, could I?"

"Of course not, no. I know I may smoke, may n't I? And then?"

"Then —" she made an effort not to alter her voice, and exaggerated its pitch in the attempt, "oh, then it became very apparent from the attitude of all the servants that they had heard the news about — Jack. That is to say, Thomas spoke

to me in a whisper at lunch, and never handed me anything twice, and the coachman never sent up for orders at all, and I only just stopped the maids in time from pulling down all the blinds, and Mrs. Binks has been drinking tea in the servants' hall in her black silk dress ever since three o'clock, and did not answer my bell until I rang the second time, and then she appeared with a clean handkerchief in her hand, and a face as long as a fiddle. Are n't servants fond of a tragedy? And am I very heartless to notice all these things, Digby?"

"Heartless? No," he said with emphasis, remembering what his wife had said in the inn; "and after lunch, please?"

"Oh, after lunch I went to sleep. And when I woke up I felt better. I was able to think without getting sentimental over it. Don't you see, it is like this. There isn't anybody."

"I don't understand," said the musician.

"I could hardly expect you to," she said dryly; "there is somebody for you. But

for me there is nobody, and I am getting old, and I feel frightened sometimes. Remember, that is an admission. I don't know why I am telling you all this, because I want to get to the end. At all events, I had a sort of sensation that I had tried more than most women to gain something, and I had hopelessly missed it; so it was time to turn round and do something, as I should have to go on living all the same. Now, there were two courses open to me: one was to turn the literary cynic and write a novel in which I could vent my spite against my own particular Fate by personifying myself in an ill-used heroine, who talks epigrams from the moment she gets out of bed in the morning, and who loves to assure her men acquaintances that they may mention questionable topics before her if they like. And the other was to repent and do good works, and become the fashionable philanthropist, and tell the poor and fatherless that they have got to be improved in their condition whether they

think they want improving or not. Guess which I chose! Oh, I do wonder if you will guess right;" and she dropped on her knees beside him and looked into his face.

"If you were any ordinary clever woman, I should guess the first; but —" he paused and looked at the eager, scornful face, and smiled to himself, "no, that would n't do for you, Joan. And yet, neither would the other. I can't imagine you walking through the village in awful, hideous garments, carying a rice pudding and a Bible. Oh, Joan, surely *you* are not going in for that self-indulgent bosh known as charity?"

"That is where you are so like a man!" She flung herself away from him, and began walking about the room and talking quickly. "You are right about the novel, yes. You see, if I were to write a book it would be so frightfully personal that I should have to take a pseudonym to begin with. And where is the satisfaction of jeering at your friends when they don't know you are doing it? But I don't know

why you should take up the old, played-out notion of charity as the only alternative. Who wants to go about with Bibles and rice puddings? Nous avons changé tout cela, mon ami! Why, there is no such thing as charity left now; have n't you learnt that from Sir Marcus? It is philanthropy nowadays, my good sir, equally self-indulgent, of course, but more modern and ten times more entertaining. The Bible never need come in at all, and no one sees the rice puddings, *they 're* all managed by committees; all you have to do is to lend your name for the circulars of the league, and hold meetings over afternoon tea in your drawing-room, and *talk*. That is all. *Now* do you see what I mean?"

"I gather that you mean to take up philanthropy as a new form of diversion; but I am afraid I do not quite recognize the full advantages of the scheme. I don't see —"

"Of course you don't," cried Lady Joan, cheerfully, "you have no cause to see. *I*

don't see the full advantages of married life, for instance. But I am really going to be serious now, so don't interrupt. In the first place, I am not going to be philanthropic in the country; that only means being hopelessly under the thumb of one's rector, or hopelessly at variance with him; besides, it is so mortally dull, and — I don't mean to be dull just now. So I am going up to Pont Street in October, and I shall organize a regular philanthropic campaign. Oh, I am going to have a fine time! I shall sing for concerts in the East End, I shall paint match-boxes and gridirons and send them to fancy fairs, I shall play with the children in the hospitals, and teach the children of Whitechapel — thank Heaven! no amount of philanthropy can ever spoil the children — I shall even give sumptuous receptions, at which we shall discuss the evils of the sweating-system and the possibility of distributing certain portions of bread and soup to the deserving poor during the cold weather. Who knows that I

may not speak on a platform before long? There is always the bearing-rein to fall back upon, if all the others fail; or the prevention of cruelty to birds, now that wearing feathers is out of fashion; or compulsory vaccination, or hygiene and rational dress and other horrors which are so excellent for the poor. Think of my reputation, Digby! It will be so assured that even Mrs. Reginald Routh will not dare to cast a stone at me, and I shall be able to say just what I choose about *anybody*. Why, philanthropy, properly managed, is as telling as music! Won't it be glorious fun, Digby? Hey-day, what a noise I am making!"

He got up and stirred the logs in the low grate with his foot. She was lying on the sofa, looking at him.

"Well, have you nothing to say to my beautiful idea?" she asked presently.

The musician gulped at something in his throat.

"It is surprising," he began, with an attempt at his old impressive manner, "how

difficult it is to make ourselves understood, especially in our most intimate relations."

"What are you talking about?" said Lady Joan.

"I mean," went on the musician, desperately, "that I don't know how to tell you all that is in my mind, dear. Perhaps it is best left unsaid. I don't know; but — when you ask me what I think of it, I can only feel that it is all sad, dreadfully sad. I'm afraid I have not made it very clear, have I?"

She moved her feet, and he came and sat down on the end of the sofa.

"Tell me what it is that is sad," she asked, shading her eyes with her hand.

"What you have been saying, that there is n't anybody," he said, and boldly moved the hand, and held it fast, and looked into her eyes.

"No more there is, — except you," she answered recklessly, and looked back at him for a moment.

Something surged up to his lips in the

silence of the next few minutes, and he held his breath and tightened his grasp on the cold fingers before he said it. Then she pulled away her hand almost roughly, and spoke quickly.

"Do you know it is nearly eleven? Norah had a bad night with the baby last night, and you look awfully tired too. Had n't you better be moving?"

So he did not say it after all.

"You have not told me what you think yet. I suppose you are only laughing at me," she said, when he bade her good-bye.

He found himself smiling in a conventional manner; he could not have said why.

"Oh, no, why should I? I think it is very wise of you," he said, opening the door to go out; "and when I tell Norah she will say 'Just like Joan!' Good-night."

And she answered down the stairs after him, "Good-night, and mind you tell Norah all about it!"

"I'll be hanged if I do," thought the musician, as he walked down the drive; and he congratulated himself all the way back on not having made a fool of himself.

"I 'm sure I hope he won't," added Lady Joan to herself out loud, as the front-door banged. Then she walked unsteadily into her boudoir, and made up the fire, and sat down on the sofa, and looked dully into the flames. And presently she turned and hid her face in the cushions, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER IX.

Lady Joan went up to her town house at the end of the summer, but her philanthropic campaign was not a success. The field of philanthropy was overcrowded just then with people like herself, who had too little wealth and too much energy to be of any practical use to the great organizers of charity, who never wanted anything from their devotees but subscriptions and obedience; a reformer does not want to be interfered with by a penniless nobody who has independent views concerning his method of reform. And Lady Joan soon found that she was not in a set that troubled itself much about the suffering poor. The people she met in Digby's studio were mostly theoretical Socialists, who complained that the cause of Socialism was being

ruined by the enthusiasts who tried to make it work before its principles had been properly disseminated among the people; and amongst her other friends were some who had a small and private charity of their own, but were so jealous of it when they had that she found it impossible to work with them; or else they were quite willing to use her house and her carriage and her time, if she would meekly give them all these without being allowed a voice in the arrangements or a particle of credit for what she did. And she found that as much sweating went on in the administration of charity as its administrators were in the habit of exposing in the slums; she met jaded gentlewomen in the employ of philanthropists, who spent their lives in addressing envelopes at something less than the market price, and footsore secretaries who walked the slums to verify the abuses which their chiefs were to denounce in the newspapers. She had never had a high opinion of philanthropy, but it was consid-

erably lowered by her new experiences of it. She humbly offered to sing a ballad at a people's concert in the East End; but her offer was politely refused on the ground that several of the leading singers of the day had offered their services free for the same concert; and she was asked if she would dance the skirt dance instead, at a titled lady's 'At Home' for another charitable object. Sundry hard-working clergy came to hear of her estimable intentions, and wrote to ask her for subscriptions and to offer her district-visiting in their parishes; but as it was the æsthetic side of philanthropy alone that had attracted her, she declined their offers promptly and with a shudder.

Once, in an impetuous mood, she joined a Ladies' League for the supply of soup and bread to a select company of the deserving poor in a West End parish. There were more ladies altogether than there were afterwards recipients of their charity; and they all met weekly in one another's

houses to organize their system of relief during the cold weather. The cold weather came along before the preliminaries were arranged. There were no gentlemen at these meetings until after the business had been transacted, when afternoon tea was brought in, and a *recherché* reception followed. But the frost continued, and there seemed no prospect of the sufferers ever receiving their bread and their soup. Just before Christmas, it came to Jady Joan's turn to hold the meeting in her house. It took place in a dingy old library that day, and there was no reception afterwards, and no afternoon tea. Lady Joan herself moved three resolutions at the opening of the sitting: the first was that there should be no more meetings; the second, that all future business should be transacted by a committee of gentlemen only; and the third, that the charity, if given at all, should be administered to all sufferers, irrespective of character. All three motions were thrown out indignantly, and their proposer sent in her resignation the next day.

"Philanthropy is the selfish pastime of the great, and I was an owl to meddle with it," she said gloomily to Sir Marcus, who happened to be lunching with her one day about that time. Sir Marcus always came to see her whenever he came to town, and told her of his last letter to the papers, or his last effort to improve the condition of the working-man; — she had loved his boy, and she always listened without laughing at him; these were the two ideas he vaguely connected with her in his mind. Another man, a less easily impressed one, might have been killed by the suddenness of Jack's death; but Sir Marcus, although his infatuation for his scapegrace son had been the deepest attachment he had ever felt for any one, had been really more affected by the tragedy of his end than by his actual death; and so it came about that he was considerably aged by the shock, and yet was able to return again to his books and his hobbies.

"Philanthropy in town is all a mistake,

my dear," he answered her, hotly; "it's nothing but a trumped-up job among the swells, that's what it is, of course. In my time, you know, before there were such a lot of them in the nursery, and when I was pitching my thousands right and left, — *that* was philanthropy if you like! But now philanthropists are merely commercial contractors, — you mark my words, my dear, commercial contractors running the whole concern for profit; and what good can come out of that, eh? Ah, you must come down into the country for morals; Londoners are the biggest thieves in existence."

"Not so bad as that, Sir Marcus," she remonstrated; "I don't think philanthropists are commercial contractors exactly, at least not the ones I've met. They are mostly egoists and mostly unbusinesslike, but not thieves, no."

"Isn't that what I said?" said Sir Marcus, testily. It was not; but she did not wish to risk her reputation with him, and she listened patiently while he poured

out his own schemes for the education of the country laborer, or rather of the Murville laborer, until she repeated her first remark to herself with a yawn, and wrote round to Digby, after Sir Marcus had left, to come and tell her what to do next.

She had seen a good deal of Digby lately; he knew all about her ambitious schemes and her failure to carry them out, and he was eager to sympathize with her whenever she would allow him; while she accepted his sympathy as one who did not want it particularly, but liked to command it at will. And during the growth of his baby's teeth, which rendered both conversation and work difficult in the flat in Victoria Street, the musician often found his way to Lady Joan's house in Pont Street in the hours that he would otherwise have spent in writing music. It is true that he honestly tried for some time to write classical lullabies to his daughter in the pantry, that being the corner in the flat furthest removed from the nursery, while his wife

sang her to sleep in the cradle to the homely ditty of " Hush-a-by-baby," and that he always nursed her when he was asked, and did not swear when he made her cry and was blamed for his clumsiness but after a time he made no objection when his wife sent him round to take her excuses and to dine alone with Lady Joan, until it became no uncommon thing for him to spend his evenings with her, while Norah stayed at home and nursed the baby. They were all three totally regardless of public opinion in the matter, though it might well have come to their ears that Norah was being very generally pitied by the musician's lady friends, not for her loneliness, but for her neglect of the treasure she seemed so unconscious of possessing, and that the musician was allowed to go scathless as he always was, and that Lady Joan was hated without exception. But the musician, who had done what he liked since his infancy, meant to go on doing it now in defiance of all the scandals that were

about; and Lady Joan, for her part, always went out of her way to add to them if she could; while Norah only ignored them altogether, and smiled to herself, and so deceived every one who knew her, including her husband.

"Yes?" she said to Mrs. Reginald Routh, when that lady remarked one day, during a short call, that Mr. Digby always seemed to be in Pont Street, "it is very unfortunate he should miss you so often; but Joan has wanted him a good deal lately, and I have been only too glad, when baby has been fretful, to send him round to see her. There is such a platonic friendship between them, you know."

"Platonic, do you call it, Mrs. Digby?" said her visitor, with her accustomed smile. "Do you know, my dear Mrs. Digby, that from what *I* know of Plato, — and I attended all Mr. Digby's lectures on Plato and Schopenhauer, and their relation to music and Socialism, which was before you knew him, of course, — I don't *fancy* he

would have countenanced such goings on in his ideal Republic? Of course you know best, and I should not dream of interfering between a wife and a husband; but I should certainly say myself, if I were asked, that that young woman's behavior in Pont Street is more fit for the Old Testament than for Plato. Perhaps you have not read any Plato, though?"

"No; only the Old Testament; and that I was obliged to do for myself, you see, because there were no lectures upon it," rejoined Norah, gravely; and she bore the swift scrutiny of Mrs. Reginald Routh without flinching. Mrs. Reginald changed the subject; it was the only thing left her to do, and she did it well.

"Of course I should not speak so strongly, dear Mrs. Digby, if I had not known your husband so well and so intimately before he met you at all. And perhaps if I had had your good fortune," here she glanced in a telling manner at the baby on Norah's knee, "and could have had a small soul

to develop, I, too, should have become a womanly woman, with no desire for intellectual improvement. Ah, Mrs. Digby, you have in your child what we childless wives have failed to find in our search after wisdom. I frankly own that you are to be envied."

And she had her revenge, for Norah believed her.

Digby came in when she had gone.

"Joan has sent round for me to help her out of a difficulty. Any message, childie? I shall be back to dinner. And have you seen my warm gloves?"

"I mended them and put them in your drawer, dear. That's just like a man to be surprised at finding them in the right place! Oh, I wish you would write about the bath-room pipe — "

"Damn," said Digby, audibly.

"Don't, Digby. It really is important, because the wall is getting damp, and — "

"That does n't matter, does it? I've moved the piano."

"But it is coming through into the nursery, Digby."

"Oh, all right. I 'll do it when I come in."

"Mrs. Reginald has been here."

"I know; that 's why I have n't. What did she say?"

"She seemed to think that you and Joan were enacting an Old Testament episode without the sanction of inspiration."

"What awful cheek!"

"Oh, she only meant to be friendly, I think. She seemed to admire baby."

"Deuced clever woman, Mrs. Reginald. I 'll write about the pipe when I come in."

He was with Lady Joan for about two hours, and it was quite dark when he left her house. They had reached that stage in their intercourse when conversation is rather difficult, but companionship is a matter of course. They did not discuss the arts now, nor the ethics of Socialism, nor the position of woman. None of these things seemed to matter half so much to

them as his prospects of getting fresh pupils, or her choice of a dining-room paper. And sometimes they did not speak at all, though their silence was never an embarrassed one. This afternoon there had been more than usual to talk about, for she had resolved to give up her visions of philanthropy and was thinking of going abroad, and he had been trying to dissuade her, purely in his character of adviser, without letting her see that he hoped she would remain in London. He was beginning to realize how much he liked coming to see her, and how great a relief it was to escape from the people who had claims upon him, and for whose bath-room pipes he was legally responsible, to some one who had no claim upon him, and whose bath-room pipes were in consequence so much pleasanter to superintend. And he walked down the doorsteps slowly, with a feeling that he had not persuaded her to remain, and that he was a fool not to have used the only methods of persuasion that he would like to have used, and that might

have gained his point. There was a weary vista before him of endless letters to the plumber, of endless commonplace conversations with his wife, of endless unfulfilled ambitions, everything that chokes the energy of the artistic enthusiast who has been married long enough to lose his first illusions, and not long enough to learn to do without them. He was in the mood to be exasperated by a triviality, and he swore beneath his breath when a man with a beard stumbled against him in the portico.

"Digby!" shouted the man with the beard, in a voice that made the passers-by stop and look.

The musician recoiled, and stammered something. He said afterwards that the fateful truth flashed upon him in a second of time, but in reality he stood there for some moments while the existence of the man before him slowly worked its way to his brain. And with the realization of Jack's existence came the realization of something he had been trying for six

months to hide from himself. Jack's return from the dead meant — good heavens! what did it not mean to him now?

And to Joan also?

"You — you must not go into her suddenly like this; it might kill her, the shock, don't you know," he found himself saying, in a kind of dream, when the first hurried and incoherent words of greeting had passed between them. Joan was all he was thinking of just then, Joan and the last six months of uninterrupted friendship. Yet Digby was not a bad man, nor a malicious one exactly; but his old affection for his brother, which had always depended more on habit than on natural affinity, had been rudely broken by his supposed death, and it was not easy to revive it again now, nor was it made easier by a concurrence of circumstances which seemed to demand that he should rather have stayed away altogether. Why had Jack chosen this moment to come back? A few years back the musician would have found an occasion for

moralizing in the strange conflict of feelings within him.

"I — I feel quite queer myself," he said, making an effort to grasp his brother's hand more warmly; "why on earth did n't you let us know that the wrong man — that the other man was killed? You always did imagine that we knew all about you without your troubling to write to us, Jack. Never was so surprised in my life, — delighted, I should say. But what does it all mean?"

"Eh, what? Why, don't you see, I thought it was all bally rot to write and explain that they had cabled my name instead of Jack Rackstraw's, because I meant to come over that next mail. And then, when I got another berth offered me with an elegant screw, I reckoned I 'd take it and go on being dead for a space, rather a scheme, don't you twig? And besides, I thought if I lay low till next fall Joan might find out she cared for me a bit more than she calculated, eh? Has n't it been

hard work, though, just sitting tight and not hearing from her! Now, fire yourself, Digby, and let me freeze on to that bell."

"But look here, old man," urged the musician, desperately, "let me go in first and explain. You go round to Norah and wait till I come for you. These — these shocks are too much for women; they can't always stand them; women can't, you know. Surely you must see the folly of frightening her —"

"You old woman, Digby; what by all that's holy are you playing at? Joan's not that sort; besides, if you'd been away three years, old chap, I guess you'd run the risk of seeing a girl turn pale for you. Eh? So clear out."

He twisted the musician round with one touch of his hand, and flew up the steps. But quick as he was, Digby was quicker still, and sprang before him at the top of the steps, panting, and hardly knowing what he did. Jack seized him by the arm in slowly dawning amazement.

"'Pon my word, if Joan 's half as frightened as you look now, I shall begin to believe it *is* a shock to meet some one who 's supposed to have kicked. You want a drink, old man, and if you don't go and get it now I —"

"I know, I 'm going, I am really, Jack. It 's purely for your own good I am speaking; why should it matter to me? But you're such an unsuspecting chap, and I don't want to see you made a fool of; and look here, Jack, I 'm a brute to suggest it, I know, but women are fickle, as all the world knows, and she thought you were dead, and after all no one could blame her if — don't you see?"

There was a sudden pause then, and a loosening of the strong grip on his arm, and the musician began to feel something of the brute he had been so ready to avow himself.

"Of course, I 'm not insinuating that there 's some one else, I don't know his name if there is; but knowing their nature

as I do, I think it 's wiser not to — not to give them a clean bill of constancy always — eh ? At all events, how would it be for me to meet you at the flat when I 've sounded the ground a bit with Joan ? It would only make a delay of half-an-hour or so, and — my dear fellow !"

Jack had caught him by the coat in a sudden paroxysm of nervous fury, and Digby found himself half throttled and pinned against the stone wall of the portico, while a loud peal from the door-bell resounded through the house.

" You brute — you ! Why do you want to keep me from her ? If you were any one else standing between her and me I would wipe the floor with you. There — clear out, can't you ? Oh, hang it, I 've been half crazed to meet her all day, and now — that devilish suggestion of yours — ah ! can't you go, you ?"

Digby shrank back as he felt himself free. There were steps coming along the hall inside, and he curbed himself to speak carelessly as he turned away as if to leave.

"Poor chap, I forgive you when I think of the hash you are going to make of it. You were n't born to deal with wily women, and when to-morrow comes, ah! — "

After all, when the man opened the door, it was Digby who entered the house. A man with a short beard was walking rapidly down the street.

"What is it? Anything wrong?" asked Lady Joan, quickly.

"No, no, nothing. Only I feel as though I had been persuading you against your will and for my own selfish reasons, and I came back to say so. There is nothing to keep you in England — nothing. Why not go abroad — to-morrow?"

"Oh. Is that all? How stupid of you to come back and look tragic just for that. And as if I should not go without waiting for your permission, Monsieur! Why, I have just been making out a route. Come and look."

He followed her finger mechanically with his eyes as she traced it over the map, and

he made a great effort to compose himself. She exhausted France and Germany before she noticed his silence, and then she pushed away the Baedeker suddenly, and leaned back to try and see his face. He was standing a little behind her.

"I wish you 'd say something, Digby. You look as if you 'd seen a ghost."

"I have," he answered quietly, without taking his eyes from the top of her head.

"Whose was it?" she asked, half puzzled, half amused.

"My brother Jack's. He is in London."

He did not see that the color fled from her face, nor that she gasped a little as though she had a difficulty in breathing. What he saw was that she slowly turned round on her chair and looked to him beseechingly.

"Is — it — true?" she asked in a hushed tone. The dull anguish of it lent a fierceness to his purpose.

"I have spoken to him. Would to God it were not!"

It did not seem strange to her that he should say so, nor that he did not come and stroke her hair as he so often did when she fancied herself in trouble. She crossed her arms on the top of the chair, and laid her cheek on them.

"I 've always known that he must come back. Jack could never be dead," she murmured in a hopeless tone of voice; "he is overflowing with life, crude, arrogant life. Why did I believe them when they said he was dead?"

"Perhaps you wished to believe it," said the musician.

When he found the silence that followed no longer endurable, he moved a little nearer to her, where he could see the fierce movement of her shoulders and the curls on the back of her neck.

"Shall we resume our conversation?" he said, and touched the Baedeker.

"How can we? I must wait a little, see Jack, no, no, not see him, but — but write to him — if it is possible he never had my

other letter? Why has he come back to torment me just when I was beginning to feel happy? And — oh, drop that book, can't you? Don't you understand that I cannot go abroad now?"

"Why not?"

"Because, oh, how dense you are! Even if I can get away from Jack, and I feel as if I never should be free again, but even supposing I can break his heart and leave him, how can I go away and be by myself interminably? You don't know me if you think that would do me any good."

"I don't think so. I did not suggest your going alone. You don't know *me* if — you think I could let you go."

She raised herself slowly on to her elbows and covered her eyes with her hands. He was looking down at the scarlet cover of the Baedeker.

"What do you mean?"

"What I have said. You don't want to see Jack. I will take you away from him. Will you come?"

She did not speak, and a shiver passed swiftly down her frame.

He came nearer to her.

"I believe you like him still," he said, with a curious smile.

She raised her head, and clenched her fists, and laughed harshly. She, too, looked at the scarlet cover of the Baedeker.

"I should hate him — if he were worth it. But I have never loved him."

"Then answer my question. Will you come?"

She moistened her lips and tried to speak clearly.

"We were so happy as it was. Can't it go on?"

"No, it cannot go on. If you were a man you would not ask that. Will you come?"

She closed her eyes, and tried not to hear the singing in her ears, and thought he would come and touch her. But he did not move at all.

"You are frightened, are you not?" he said.

"Of you? No, I don't think I am frightened of you."

He came so near then that she felt his warm breath on her neck.

"Not of me, oh, no. But, all the same, you are frightened, or else you would not hesitate."

He turned away again, and she dropped her hands quickly from her eyes.

"You are not going?"

"Not if you wish me to stay," he said, and folded his arms and waited.

"I do want you to stay — give me time to think, Digby — I — "

A cab rattled past the house outside, and as the sound died away, she rose slowly and with difficulty from her chair and looked at him. And he came and supported her on his arm, and drew his fingers up her throat and round her face to her forehead, and back again to her chin, and so forced her to meet his eyes.

"I will come," she said.

CHAPTER X.

The Squire sat making calculations in his study, as he did nearly every day of his life. There was nothing in his appearance to denote that anything unusual, least of all anything exceedingly pleasant, had occurred to him. And yet, it was only that morning that they had told him Jack was alive and was coming home the same evening. Perhaps it was that, like Digby, he found it hard to revive an affection that had ceased to be part of his life six months ago; or, more likely still, he felt in some vague way or another that Jack had come back to life on purpose to produce some unpaid debts for his father to settle. Sir Marcus never dissimulated, and he made no attempt to conceal the fact that his joy in his son's resurrection did not wholly compensate for

the trouble that was certain to be a consequence of it.

So he sat making calculations as usual, though his wife felt bound to go into hysterics in the drawing-room, and the rest of the family were trying to erect a shaky evergreen arch in the garden, with "Welcome home!" nailed on it in evergreen letters. They were making a good deal of noise over it, too, and the calculations did not get on, in consequence. They related this time to rabbits, to the number imported yearly from abroad, and the inadequate number reared in the home country itself, and Sir Marcus was making them with the object of writing a letter to the county paper, suggesting rabbit culture as a lucrative employment for the British villager. According to Sir Marcus, the British villager had an immense amount of time on his hands. Not that his interest in the duck culture was in any degree on the wane, but the county paper had refused to insert any more of his letters about the

Murville ducks and the enormous profits that the Murville laborer was said to realize from breeding them; and so the Squire had been only too glad to take up the question of tame rabbits, which was being tentatively ventilated by a neighboring Squire in another village. Sir Marcus never did anything tentatively, however; so he began by talking rabbits at every man he met in the village street; and as every man he met, owing to his own former persuasions, was a ducker, that worthy generally received his recommendation of this new animal with something like distrust. The duckers of Murville could not understand any article of commerce that did not lay eggs, and although they obediently ate the few samples that the Squire sent round to them for their Sunday dinners, yet they did so with much condescension, and no little suspicion that they were being coaxed into liking a new food that must be inferior because it was cheap. The Murville laborer had retained some of his independence, in

spite of being the property of a Radical overlord.

"Tell ye what it is, George," said Tom Clarke, the biggest ducker in the village, as he sat smoking one evening in the newly built club in the main street, "I be altogether flustered along o' them new fancies of the Squire, I be. What be rabbits, hey, man? Can ye tell me that, now? Ye be oop at the Manor all day, along o' the Squire hisself, so ye ought to know for sure."

The handy man shook his head dumbly, which was his usual form of reply, and the one that his hearers generally preferred; and Tom Clarke continued his ruminations for the benefit of any of the members present who might be inclined to listen to him.

"Rabbits beats me altogether, I be bound to own. They bain't poultry, and they bain't butcher's meat neither. What be they, anyhow? The Squire be a proper kind gentleman for sure, but when he takes up with them okkard new fancies what no

one can't explain, it be proper hard to know how to treat 'un. Why, George man, when the parson was readin' of the Litany, Sunday past, and come to the 'kindly fruits of the earth,' I thinks to myself, 'that 's rabbits, that is,' and I shuts my mouth tight, I does! And me what 's never missed sayin' and singin' all the prayer-book allows 'un to do, this forty year that I 've sat in the choir up agin poor Jack Priest's tablet. 'T ain't as though I be an unreligious body what sings an' don't pray, as I 've known some do; but there 's never a Amen that I don't take part in, and there bain't a trap in the service as can catch me now, allays allowin' for the reply to the tenth commandment what were put in by the devil or the chapel people, and caught on by the parsons accidental, so to speak. So you see how a man be upset all along o' them beasts, if ye can call a thing a beast what eats like string."

Mrs. Tom Clarke, in spite of the cookery lectures that had been given in the Club on

Wednesday evenings, by an expert from London, who had evolved strange dishes from herring heads and mutton bones with the aid of a patent portable stove, still preferred to cook her husband's food in her own way, and this generally consisted in putting it into a saucepan from which the duck's food had just been extracted, — a process which had the effect of making everything taste alike ; so it was certainly probable that the Squire s rabbit had not had a fair chance in that cottage, at all events.

But in spite of the opposition he was receiving from his most faithful adherents, Sir Marcus still sat patiently, and made his calculations for his new letter to the papers. He had already written to two or three members of Parliament for satistics, and had received replies from the House of Commons which he folded on his writing-table with the address uppermost, and in which they mostly referred him to Whitaker ; and he had caused a slight disruption

at the luncheon table, only that day, by wanting to know the good of the expensive education he had given his children if it turned them out ignorant of rabbits. The children were wishing just then that their father's new hobby had not happened to possess him in the Christmas holidays, and Lady Raleigh had taken the precaution of telling her cook to jug the hare and make it as unlike a rabbit as possible, so that dinner might pass off more peaceably than luncheon had done.

"I must have Joan down; *she* would sympathize," murmured Sir Marcus, laying his pen down, and reading the first sentences he had written of his letter. "Splendid woman, Joan, never laughs at my little ideas, and takes such an interest in them. Shows what intelligence can do for a girl. She 'd have made Jack realize the responsibilities of existence, she would. Devil take my head, why is it swimming so this afternoon?"

The letter did not get on very fast, there

was too much similarity between its sentiments and those he had so often expressed before; it looked rather as though he were adapting an old letter by scratching out "duck" and substituting; "rabbit," for he found himself writing that the feathers and eggs alone of one rabbit more than repaid the cost of rearing it.

"Digby used to come down and see me oftener than he does now," said Sir Marcus, laying down his pen again and passing his hand across his brow. "I don't like his being away so long, and the dear little boy too; why don't they come and see me? Got a wife? Oh, to be sure, yes; my memory don't seem so strong as it was, somehow: to be sure, a wife, yes. Nice little thing, very; wonder if she would know how many we get yearly from Holland? My hand gets more tired than it used, though it would n't do to say so; people are so ready to talk about an old man breaking up before he 's out of the sixties. Why, I walked up from the post-

office in eight minutes and a half this morning; I can beat the youngsters now, eh? I wish Joan would come and catch hold of this accursed letter, it keeps drifting so far away. I always wonder what made her take Digby; funny fellow, Digby. What am I saying? It 's Jack who is her husband, is n't it? I 've been writing too much to-day, that 's what it is. I 'm only a little queer, but — I wish Joan would come and finish my letter for me. Why won't Digby bring her down now? Let 's get hold of the whiskey; that 's what I want to set me straight, of course. What nonsense they are talking; men don't fall to pieces when they are sixty-four. I can walk with the best of them, eh, Joan, my dear?"

There were three people destined for Murville Manor in the 6.45 from Euston that evening. Two of them were in separate third-class smoking carriages at the end of the train; the other sat in a first-class compartment. They were Digby, and Jack, and Lady Joan, all summoned by the

same telegram, and all obeying the summons unknown to each other, and with the greatest speed possible. The two brothers, singularly enough, each spent the greater part of the two hours' journey in reading and re-reading a letter, which was written, in both cases, in a thick, rather illegible handwriting. The musician, as he took his from the already opened envelope, gave a half-conscious look round the carriage before he read it. It dated from the day before, and had no heading to it:—

"I think on consideration that the new form of diversion you proposed to me the other night would not work so well as we thought. So I am not going to entertain it any longer. You will probably blame me for my vacillation; but then, you should not have established a precedent for vacillation in the 'Relton Arms,' four years ago. After all, there is nothing left but the book; and I am going to be away, and alone, until I have written it. Don't be alarmed. I am not going to soak it with my own experiences.

"JOAN."

His younger brother, in the other carriage, did not look at any one when he took his letter from his breast-pocket and unfolded it. It was very limp, and looked as though it had been unfolded many times before. It was dated two days earlier: —

"My dear Boy, — I am a cad, and I hate myself for what I have done to you. It is quite the meanest thing I have done in my life. Please believe that I did not authorize Digby to come and tell you for me, last night; he wanted to spare me the unpleasantness, I suppose, of confessing to you that I was a brute. But I am a brute, all the same; I should only be a worse one if I were to marry you now. I have n't the least right to expect you to grant me a favor, but I shall be glad if you will take this as final.

"Joan Relton."

The station for Murville village was two miles away from the Manor House, or from any human habitation of importance; and as the train slowly steamed away from it to-night, the three passengers whom it had

brought from town, unknown to each other, were the only three whom it had deposited on the platform. They found themselves standing together near the exit, and there was an awkward moment of recognition while they fumbled with cold fingers for their tickets. Digby had apparently lost his altogether; Lady Joan had hers ready, and passed out swiftly; and Jack promptly gave up the wrong half of his and passed out after her, in spite of the station-master's expostulations.

"Stupid of George to be late," observed Jack in the road outside. He was clearing his throat a good deal, and looking up the road with a great show of concern.

"It was odd that we should all catch the same train," she said, stamping her feet, and coughing with unnecessary violence; "I suppose you have not been down before?"

"No; they only knew of my arrival in time to cable to me that my father was dying," he said, with a queer mixture of humor and bitterness; "life is very rum sometimes, is n't it?"

"Always," she said fervently, and shivered among her furs. They both looked up the road then, and prayed for the advent of George and the cart. Digby's irritated tones could be heard from within, concerning his missing ticket.

"I say, won't you let fly for the fire in the booking-office till George comes? I reckon you're cold some," began Jack again, awkwardly.

"Oh, no, please don't trouble about me," she replied politely, as though she had just been introduced to him for the first time.

Digby came out and joined them.

"He 's always late," he began, in a high-pitched tone, also looking up the road with a great show of interest.

"He is a countryman, you see," said Lady Joan, with gravity.

"And the mother has been at him for six years," added Jack.

They discussed the handy man, without a suspicion of a smile, for some minutes longer, and they continued to look up the

road, and back at the clock in the station, and anywhere except at each other, until the welcome sound of wheels at last drew near, when they all flung themselves upon the handy man, without mercy, and robbed him of his few wits at once.

"How is your master, George?"

"Yes, how is Sir Marcus, George?" added Joan, anxiously.

"Aye, how be the Squire, for sure, poor gentleman?" chimed in the solitary porter from behind.

"And what on earth possessed you to bring the luggage cart, George?" added Digby, wrathfully.

The handy man slowly dismounted from his seat, and made a desperate effort to say what was required of him.

"He be proper bad, he be; leastways so the cook told me when I come by the larder window with the sprouts, or I should say the celery for dinner it was, an' Lady Raleigh, she would have it as it were too slippy to bring the dogcart, notwithstandin'

as it bain't the cart what falls down, but the animal for sure, an' he won't last till mornin', poor gentleman, though the best London doctor come down by the five-forty o' purpose to have a last look of him, what went far towards killin' of 'im off in my thinkin'. An' the luggage is to be sent on afterwards, if ye please, Mr. Jack; an' Tom Clarke he says as how he means to put off his visit to his sister, what 's married into the grocery business at Reading, till he be sure how things means to turn out, cos he says he bain't a-goin' of to miss a choreal funeral, what has n't been for nigh upon thirty —"

"Go to the horse's head, George," said Digby, sternly, and he turned to hand Lady Joan into the cart; "it is not very comfortable, I am afraid, but Jack and I will walk on, which will give you more room."

Lady Joan drew back and hesitated a little.

"You had better come too, had n't you?" she said; "it would be much quicker, and —"

"Aye, sir, there be room and to spare," put in the porter, encouragingly; "you 've only got to put your arms round one another all tidy an' comfortable like, an' there ain't no fear o' tumbling out. Bless ye, sir, there be as many as six together in a cart like this on market days, all as safe and as pleasant as can be."

"An' there bain't no time to lose, Mr. Digby," added George, from the horse's head; "leastways, the end might come while we be gossipin' here, and the Lord grant him a peaceful — "

"Come and take the reins, George," interrupted Lady Joan, suddenly mounting the cart without any assistance at all, "and get in quickly, you two; there 's loads of room, of course."

They began by sitting stiffly on the edge of the seat, as far away from each other as possible; but the first plunge forward of the restive pony nearly tipped up the seat and sent them all backwards, and a parting admonition from the friendly porter followed them up the road.

"Hold on tight to the lady, sirs; that be the only way of doin' it," he bawled at the top of his voice; and although it was an attitude that none of the three would have chosen at that moment, they were compelled by common prudence to follow his advice; and they completed the drive in silence, sitting on the narrow seat of the little rickety cart, with their arms locked together, and their hands unavoidably clasped.

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The Squire's letter to the papers was never finished, and nobody ever told him how many rabbits were imported annually from Holland. It was a question he repeatedly asked of those around him on the last night of his life, though he varied it, when Joan and his two sons arrived, by wanting to know when Jack was going to be married.

"Soon, quite soon," Lady Joan whispered to him reassuringly, and she put her hand in Jack's to confirm the delusion. Jack knew it was a delusion, and did not press

it; he had come to understand her at last.

They stood together in the library, a week after the Squire's death, on the eve of her departure for Relton.

"I was a fool ever to think you could care for me," he said sadly The circumstances of the week they had spent together, since their meeting at the station, had completely dissipated their first feelings of awkardness. They were almost on the dull footing of a brother and sister, who have very little in common, but who have learnt the trick of companionship.

"I let you think I did. It was my fault, as I told you before. Had n't we better let it drop?" she said brusquely. "Oh, heavens! how old I am beginning to look," she added, as she caught a glimpse of herself in the glass over the mantelshelf.

"It is only because you are tired," he said, looking at her.

She laughed.

"At least you are truthful," she said,

carelessly; "tell me you are not wild with me, Jack. I have treated you abominably, have n't I? If only you were not so provokingly good-tempered about it, I should feel much better, I think. I always did hate whipping a dog that did n't howl. Ah, you don't understand a bit! I believe I am rotten all through, and that is why I have dished my life so effectually. And I 'm not a bit sorry, and I mean to have a good time still. Hey-day! But tell me you 're not wild, Jack."

"Oh, that 's all straight now. And it 's much worse for you, don't you know," he said, stumbling on the truth in his slow way; "I shall do all right; don't you fret yourself about me. I ought to have known I should n't do for you. Digby will take you to the station, eh?"

"I am going alone," she answered abruptly, and went out into the porch, where most of the family had come to see her off. Owing to some mismanagement on the part of the handy man, who, having

been the most important man in the village since the Squire's death and funeral, had completely neglected his usual work ever since, the pony needed shoeing on this particular afternoon, and Lady Joan could not be driven to the station in consequence. She persisted in her determination to walk alone, and Digby remained in awkward silence while his escort was being freely pressed upon her by his unconscious relations. Poor Lady Raleigh, more inconsequent than ever in the midst of her grief, kissed her convulsively, and poured out a confused medley of entreaties into her ear.

"You won't take anything to heart, dear, that Jack has said to you? He does n't mean anything he says, you know, so you must believe him when he says he loves you as much as ever. He tells me it is all right, so I am not going to say anything about it; but of course you 'll look on this as your home until he marries you, won't you, dear? And I assure you Jack

cannot bear to be away from you a single hour, but he does like to stay in his home best, so you won't think anything of his not walking to the station with you. Of course Digby is only too pleased to go with you, and all the fields about here are crowded with dangerous bulls, and if you are not quick you will lose the train, and they never keep it for you at these country stations, you know. So you must have Digby, of course. And you are sure you understand about dear Jack? You must n't listen to him, that 's all; he says he *is* so fond of you still, dear boy."

"Do have Digby, Joan; he does n't leave till to-morrow, and he only hangs about the place doing nothing, and it will take him out for an hour." This from Helen.

"I am sorry to disappoint everybody," said Lady Joan, in her clearest, most composed tones; "but if I did lose the train, Digby would not be of the least use to me in producing another one; and I 'm afraid I am not nearly unselfish enough to burden

myself with his company for the good of the community; so good-bye, sir;" and she gave him a straight look out of her eyes as she held out her hand. It was the first time she had spoken directly to him since they had parted that night in Pont Street, and he avoided her eyes.

"Good-bye. They seem very anxious to burden you with my presence, don't they?" he said, with a forced laugh; "all luck to the book."

"Thanks. I will send it to you in instalments for criticism."

He was the last to remain in the porch, watching her across the fields; and there was not a criminal in the kingdom with whom he would not gladly have changed places at that moment.

"I shall go up to-night, I think, and surprise Norah," he muttered presently. There was a dull consolation in the idea of meeting the woman who had acquired the habit of being glad to see him; and he felt a little better when he packed his bag upstairs.

The baby was in bed when he walked into the flat, and Norah was having her solitary meal in the dining-room.

"Why are you here to-night?" she asked him, as he held her to him more closely than usual. There was a gleam in the eyes he had almost despised lately for not being more observant, but he did not notice it as he kissed her softly. "So Joan went away to-day, did she?" she added.

"Joan? Did she write to you?" he asked quickly.

"Oh, no. But I knew," and she nodded at him.

"How did you know, wise woman?" he said playfully.

"Because you have come home, of course," she replied, and laughed outright. He laughed too; but there was not a pleasant ring in his merriment and it was short-lived.

"What has come over you, childie?" he said, beginning to feel vaguely alarmed.

She had disengaged herself from his arms, and was walking away to the window.

"Oh, nothing. Only it is a pity you leave your coats about. I should never have known if you had not been so careless. At least, I fancy I have known all the winter," she added dreamily, as if to herself.

"Known what?" he asked in a voice he did not seem to recognize. But he knew; and he felt rather worse than when he had stood in the porch that afternoon, watching Joan over the fields. "What a hellish sport marriage is!" he added in a bitter undertone.

She heard him, and came back to his side.

"Digby."

"Well? I don't want you to touch me, if you would rather not," he said roughly, and did not look at her.

"I want to tell you," she went on softly. "I found Joan's letter, and I read it as a matter of course; I thought it was about —

oh, never mind what. That was the day you went down to Murville; and I could not speak to you then. It has been so dreadful waiting for you to come back, Digby. Are you not going to look at me, now you have come?"

He turned round bewildered, and saw her eyes full of tears.

"Good God, Norah, do you mean you can know that, and —?"

"Yes, dear. I think I know more than you. I think I know how you have been feeling lately, and all the winter. But I did not know it was as bad as this, and when I read that letter — do you know how I felt? I think I must tell you, Digby; I have had something to bear too, you know. I felt first that something terrible had come between you and me, something that wanted pushing away with all my might; and I could n't do it alone, Digby, and you — you were not there to help me. And then — I only felt sorry for you. I have just longed for you to come back that

I might put my arms round you and comfort you, and tell you that I knew. Digby, don't turn away like that."

"But — it is inconceivable — do you know what you are saying? Do you know that if that letter had not been written, I should have — ?" He paused, for he could not bring himself to finish the sentence. But she sprang away from him suddenly, and stood in front of him in the middle of the room, with her hands clasped at the back of her head, and a blaze of triumph in her eyes.

"No, no, not that!" she cried; "never that! I knew it could not be. If I had thought you capable of that, should I be speaking to you now like this? Do you think women are such fools then? *I* know, *she* knew — that you were not capable of it, that you never meant it, that it was one of your queer impulses that make me love you so madly, and that she can never forgive in you. *That* is why she wrote you that letter. *That* is why you are mine now, mine, mine, mine!"

The musician fell in love more thoroughly that afternoon than he had ever fallen in love before.

He fell in love with his own wife.

"We must have Joan up to stay with us; she could write nicely at the table in the dining-room, could n't she?" said Norah, when they began to talk rationally again. The felt wonderfully fond of Joan this evening.

"Oh, do you think so? I fancy she 'll be all right down at Relton for the present," he answered. He was feeling that he could do with his wife for a good long time now.

"It 's just as you like, dear. And do you know, baby is so wonderfully good now she has nearly all her teeth, that I believe you would find the study quiet enough to write music in. It has been very uncomfortable for you lately, has n't it?" said she.

"Oh, it 's been all right. And I don't think I want to write music much. I say,

do you think baby will take to me now?" said he.

Then she laughed, and he demanded the reason of her merriment.

"I was thinking how Joan once said that I should never be able to understand your nature, and that you would be wounding me half-a-dozen times a day," she explained, and laughed again.

"How absurd of her," he cried, and roared with laughter himself; "but then you know, childie, Joan has always been possessed with the idea that we were not born for each other."

"Could anything be more ridiculous?" said Norah; and they broke into a fresh peal of laughter, without any apparent reason for it.

A distant wail from the nursery summoned her presently, and Digby was left alone in the dining-room. He smoked two cigarettes in silence, with a complacent smile, and he delivered himself of his favorite exclamation as he rolled up a third.

"Good heavens!" he said out loud; "if it were not for habit what chance would there be for marriage? Next time I see Joan, I'll—"

But there he stopped.

THE END.

C. Burch



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